

GERRI ANN SIWEK: *Chance Encounters*

May 16 - June 23, 2012

ART
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Neil Balkwill Civic Arts Centre
2420 Elphinstone Street, PO Box 1790,
Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 3C8

ISBN 978-1-896432-99-1

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Gerri Ann Siwek studied at the Ontario College of Art and Design, the University of Regina, and the Art Student League in New York. She currently lives in Regina, Saskatchewan where she maintains an active studio practice.

The Art Gallery of Regina is most grateful for the support of the City of Regina Arts Funding Program, the Saskatchewan Arts Board, Saskatchewan Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture, & Recreation, SaskCulture, SaskTel, SaskEnergy, Terrie Dunand RE/MAX Crown Real Estate Ltd., Saskatchewan Credit Unions, Greystone Managed Investments, Framemasters Gallery and Art Supplies, and the Cathedral Free House.



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"Fox in Tall Grass", encaustic and fabric on wood, 12" x 14", 2011



"Goldfinch in Thistle", acrylic on canvas, 36" x 24", 2012

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Cover: *"Great Blue Heron"*, encaustic monotype on paper, 8" x 10", 2010

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"My background is all steel cities - Hamilton, Toronto, and New York. I wasn't that interested in wildlife, I mean I didn't even camp until I moved to Saskatchewan...once I started to go outside, I started to be inspired." Gerri Ann Siwek, 2012

Gerri Ann Siwek tells me a story.

One day she is sitting outside painting at a retreat at St. Peter's Abbey in Muenster, Saskatchewan. At the time her hair is dyed golden blond. It glistens in the sunlight, as she sits she is suddenly swooped by a hummingbird. Startled by the bird, she looks up from the garden she is painting, suddenly aware of the birds and insects that share the environment.

It's a simple story of a chance encounter: the story points out a key factor of Siwek's artistic journey. You can call it chance or perhaps curiosity. Siwek's work is often rooted in exploration stemming from a collision with found material. In the past (inspired by an article in the newspaper) she has explored magical occurrences. She also built a collection of pop culture artifacts into a *"Funomena Mobile Museum of the Weird and Strange"*. It is her willingness to follow up her curiosity with a thorough exploration of subject matter, material, and methodology that propels her studio practice.

In the summer of 2009, Siwek set up a studio space at Regina Beach. That fall she took on the role of Artist in Residence for the Saskatchewan Arts Board at Agribition in Regina. Her project, entitled *"Let There be Flight"*, was inspired by her growing interest in the wildlife that she observed as she walked in the area around her Last Mountain Lake studio. Influenced by her hummingbird encounter, Siwek was beginning to closely observe the waterfowl and other animals that shared her locale. Sightings led to research, both in books and online, as she tried to identify different species. This led directly to the work created for this exhibition.

Siwek doesn't see herself as an environmentalist but describes her relationship with wildlife in simpler terms: *"It's really about the experiencing of wildlife, and I have more time for it now. Before, when I had a day job, I would go for a half hour walk outside. Now I can go for an hour or 2 hour walk"*. Having the time to become physically engaged in natural environment has deepened her awareness of the importance of the wetlands and natural habitat. Siwek worked for years as a graphic artist and there is a strong sense of this formal training in her art practice.

She is an artist with a clear understanding of art history and how this history informs contemporary art practice. Siwek acknowledges the influence of Matisse in this body of work and also speaks enthusiastically about the more obscure artist ¹Mary Delaney, who created more than 1000 detailed botanical paper collages in the 18th Century. She is aware of the history of collage and situates her response to that history in post modernist practice- *"The whole post-modernist movement is really borrowing from the past. As a post-modern artist I'm borrowing a little bit of this and a little bit of that. That's why I think the collage plays a big part in my work and that's why it's relevant at this time. It's a way of taking from the past"*.

Siwek acknowledges that the simple timeline of classic art history has fragmented in the post modernist era, a fragmentation that she seems to relish. In her practice the notion of collage is pushed beyond material process into a methodology of divergent inquiry, embracing multiple influences and mediums.

Illustration and graphic design seem to constantly inform her work, along with textures and images grabbed from wallpaper samples, fabric, commercial designs and illustrations. Siwek speaks enthusiastically about how her current body of work led her to explore the world of scientific illustration. She immediately brings up her new hero James Audubon but is quick to point out the different painting approach between the scientist and the artist.

In Audubon's process, a specimen was collected, the bird was killed, mounted using a system of wire and stuffing, and then repositioned into lifelike poses. Her fascination with this process seems to be with the sense of character and life that Audubon managed to bring to his dead subject matter. Siwek also borrows some of Audubon's compositional strategies. This is evident in the work entitled *"Going Up"*. The form of the bird dominates a simplified habitat; a device that as Siwek acknowledges, is frequently used by illustrators like Audubon. But it is a push-pull in her artwork, a resistance to simple reliance on this type of illustration that makes the work fresh. That struggle is heightened by the method she has used in the creation of the artwork.

Siwek seems to be moving on two parallel paths of exploration, one of subject matter and one of methodology. *"Chance Encounters"* features monotypes, a single print pulled from encaustic medium worked on a hotplate; collage with encaustic on panel; and large acrylic paintings on canvas. She utilizes several different mediums but each method she explores is time sensitive. With encaustic painting and printing, a medium that combines wax and pigment, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the image as the wax heats. Siwek describes the process as *"... very fluid and very fleeting... It's in the moment, you've got to strike while the iron's hot. You pull that print in a second because the next second the image changes, because the medium is so fluid."*

The prints, like the work *"White-breasted Nuthatch"*, are simple and spontaneous, the result of Siwek's quick strokes into the fluid wax. This spontaneity actually results from creating multiple studies of each image. Some of the images were etched into the wax more than twenty times before she was satisfied with the completed monotype.

The large acrylic works on canvas echo the sensibility of the monotypes, simple but somewhat bold. It feels like the forms of the animals have been scribed into the thick acrylic medium in a single gesture. The application of a thick layer of molding paste required the image to be quickly finalized before the acrylic medium started to dry.

Siwek seems to thrive on this kind of material challenge, *"I like the fact that I don't have full control, it's more humbling. I think it gives the work that intervention... what happens with the chaotic connections of the medium."* Compositionally, the paintings exude a sort of joyous abandon; realistic relationships of scale and habitat are cast aside in favour of rhythmic design and simplified form. The success of the work is her ability to mask the laborious nature of collage, where layers of material and medium can often become visually overwhelming. In this series, Siwek seems to have found the alchemy of combining complex methodology and content, into work that exudes a playful simplicity.

"What started this whole thing off was being buzzed by a hummingbird and the other was witnessing a magnificent bird exploding from the water. It's experiential based. I think my work comes very much from that."

For Siwek both the method and content seem to be influenced by an emotive connection; a methodology driven by personal experience; a lived connection with subject matter and a tactile connection to media. It is this fusion that allows her audience to share her emotional connection with this particular subject matter. Ultimately the work is like a good story, where content and execution are used to create work that connects with the audience.

Heather Cline,

2012

¹Explore the work of Mary Delaney in the book *"The Paper Garden": An Artist Begins Her Life's Work at 72"* by Molly Peacock.



"Going Up", encaustic and collage on wood, 12" x 12", 2011



"White-breasted Nuthatch", encaustic Monotype on paper, 8" x 10", 2011