

My daughter and I went down to Stephen May's studio to see the informal exhibit he had hung for the visit of the critic-in-residence at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. Brane Kovič was making the rounds of the studios of local artists in order to write about them for the next edition of "Billie", the gallery's publication. We tromped through the snow, Stephen on one side of me and Grace on the other to keep me upright, but my effort was rewarded with a pleasant hour of viewing. We sat over mugs of tea discussing the paintings. Stephen told us which ones he had worked hard on, which ones came easily.

One I liked especially was an interior of a dining room he had painted over a failed landscape. Stephen thought that one would sell right away. Grace liked a ceramic frog—painted many times bigger than the actual piece. It hasn't sold in any exhibit it's been in. In other words, my taste is conventional, hers isn't: something to ponder.

The last Odd Sundays of 2017 featured an open mic with 14 writers. Founded by Allison Calvern twelve years ago, it has become a favourite venue for readings by poets, fiction and non-fiction writers—young, old, well-known, beginners. The camaraderie over a glass of wine or a cup of coffee is potent. The Attic Owl café readings in Moncton must have a similar atmosphere. The three writers who took over from Calvern read: Sherry Coffey, David Watts, and Kathy Mac. Watts read about his childhood in Marysville, collecting hockey cards to get his Cub Scout collector's badge. Travis Lane read two poems for the season: "This is the dark time of the year./In the church hall the heaped up coat racks make/dark patterns on the panelling."

I've always loved a crèche scene, admired the art inspired by it, and cherished my photograph of the magnificent one in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1974 my brother and sister-in-law brought me one from Bethlehem, the figures intricately carved. Over the years I've accumulated a stable, straw, frankincense, myrrh, a sheep hut, a hillside, some angels, a star. My grandchildren loved to rearrange the figures. Once a two-year-old guest pocketed the baby Jesus on her way out. This year I was moved by a significant event. My Syrian friends visited me, and their four-year old son was taken with the crèche, wanted to know about it. Holding the baby Jesus, he told us his aunt had a baby—"two babies!" I felt compelled to say, even though I knew he wouldn't understand nor for that matter would his parents or older brother, their English being limited, that Muslims do regard Jesus as a prophet.

Another of my favourite decorations is my collection of handmade Christmas cards now adorning the fridge, with paintings by David McKay, Ted Colson, and Karen Estabrooks, and Santa cartoons by Stephen May. Peggy Hawkes has designed a card for her husband Robert's annual Christmas poem.

Michael Pacey and Karen Estabrooks came by to read me his new poems and to gift me with her fruit cake. My son John was here, and he especially liked Pacey's two butterfly poems. They tell of the many names that different languages give butterflies: "We see ourselves as caterpillars/who long to be butterflies./In Greek, *psyche* means/both butterfly and soul."

Jack Oudemans and I had a productive talk last week with Danielle Hogan, fabric artist and scholar, about the book on Nel Oudemans that Danielle is orchestrating. Accompanying the book will be an exhibit of Nel's work, first to be shown at the Art Centre at the University of New Brunswick and later to travel. Nel was a beloved leader among New Brunswick craftspeople, being awarded the Strathbutler Award, the Deichmann Excellence Award, receiving many other accolades. Her devotion to her craft and her professionalism were an inspiration to other weavers. This book is a project dear to my heart.

I'm sad to say that this is my last State of the Art column. I've enjoyed the 11 years of writing it. I had wanted to have a weekly column so when the Telegraph-Journal asked me, I jumped at the chance. It has seen me through a tough time, given me something to concentrate on other than my troubles. I wrote a Christmas column inspired by my husband's hospital ward and, I realized later, one under the influence of an opioid. I was forced to think long and hard about art. I've formed new friendships and re-energised old ones.

I want to thank the many readers who've emailed, phoned, even--as strangers--come to my door with words of encouragement. It made me happy when one reader said she and her father would talk about the column over Sunday morning coffee. And I was pleased that I'd inspired one to take up painting again. We had a good run.

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