



Her own spin

Shawn was awarded the 2011 Outstanding Achievement Award by the NL Craft Council on Nov. 22, 2011. — Gay Decker photos

Painter, craftswoman Shawn O'Hagan showcases art

By GAY DECKER
SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM

When painter and craftswoman Shawn O'Hagan first became interested in art, she didn't know of any professional female artists. She couldn't even find one in her first-year university art history book.

Still at an early age, she knew that she was an artist.

"I realized I was seeing things differently from the way other people were seeing them," O'Hagan said.

"Other people weren't as enthusiastic about colour, texture and composition; the things I got excited about."

She was, however, raised in a very creative environment. Before having children, her mother had been a commercial artist and O'Hagan was always encouraged to make things.

By the time she was 25, O'Hagan had completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Guelph, as well as a Bachelor of Education specializing in Art at the University of Toronto.

Then one month after graduating, her former husband John Steffler accepted a teaching position at the newly established Sir Wilfred Grenfell College and the couple moved to Pasadena.

Not long after arriving, they started their family. Home alone with two small children, O'Hagan often felt isolated and without creative inspiration.

"It was really a hard time to think of myself as an artist," O'Hagan said. "There wasn't a lot feeding me."

Undeterred, O'Hagan sought out the companionship of other women artists, discovering Aileen Wooldridge, Suzanne Swannie and Helly Greenacre, with whom she met once a week in Corner Brook for drawing sessions.

Then in 1979, Newfoundland writer Al Pittman approached her to illustrate a children's story he had written entitled, "One Wonderful Day for a Sculpin Named Sam."

Over the next 15 years, O'Hagan would illustrate seven children's books, including "Flights of Magic," written by her former husband John and nominated for the Governor General's award for book illustration in 1987 and "Get Me Another One," written by Robert Munsch.

The illustration work was a great fit for

O'Hagan while she was raising her young children.

"It got me very disciplined," O'Hagan said. "Getting me into the studio every day and working because I always had deadlines. I can remember sitting at my drawing table with my two-year-old sitting on my lap."

The downside, however, was she didn't have time to do her own artwork and didn't return to painting until her youngest child started school. She remembers that day vividly, recalling that after dropping her son off at kindergarten, she walked home and right into her studio to start painting.

"I had never stopped drawing and I think it was building in me and I didn't know it was happening," she said.

Her first works were a series of small, very colourful paintings, entitled Caterpillar Land that were based on her daughter's drawings of a caterpillar world complete with houses, roads and vehicles.

O'Hagan exhibited these paintings at her first solo show, "Without Shadow," held at the Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador in 1984.

After that she continued to paint highly decorative works influenced by what she defines as outsider art; works created by children or art from non-western cultures are examples. She says she is drawn to outsider art because of its disregard for convention.

"I love the beginning of each movement. I love early renaissance art as opposed to late renaissance art, primitive art, all the art that came from a non-academic place. This is what definitely appealed to me in children's art ... that absolutely pure sense of colour without following rules."

While she enjoyed success as a painter

and held other solo shows in the 1990s, O'Hagan began losing enthusiasm for it by the time she was 40. So while taking her Master of Fine Art degree at the University of Waterloo in 1993, she began doing ceramic sculpture as well.

Then in 2000, O'Hagan abandoned both painting and sculpting as a means of expressing herself.

The catalyst was a three-week artist's residency in Terra Nova Park for which she brought only fabric, needles and thread.

Around the same time, she had been undergoing therapy to help her heal from sexual abuse she had suffered as a child. She instinctively started creating artwork using embroidery and appliqué, which later became part of her show, Trace, held at the Newfoundland and Labrador Craft Council in 2000.

One work in the show consisted of a set of 50 white handkerchiefs, each one embroidered with a comment from one of her therapy sessions, while another was a pinafore that was embellished with artificial flowers.

Not only did working in fabric seem more intimate, O'Hagan felt the medium gave her more artistic options.

"I still wanted to work with colour and there weren't enough avenues to go with my painting anymore in terms of the physical process," she said.

"I had more materials to work with in fibre, more dimensions and I could still get



the colour in there if it was suitable to the piece."

In addition to textile art, O'Hagan started knitting, sewing comforters and making hooked mats. Then a trip to a yarn shop in New York City catapulted her into her new career as a professional craftswoman.

"I just fell in love with the yarns there and I wanted to knit with them, but it was so expensive I knew I couldn't afford it," she said. "That was the beginning of it. I said 'OK, I have to learn how to spin.'"

Since then, O'Hagan has not only mastered spinning, she has also created her own product line of hand-dyed, homespun yarns, and knitting kits that she sells successfully on her online Etsy store and at trade shows.

She has also led workshops, where she has shared her skills with other craftspeople across the province.

Her accomplishments have been lauded in the craft community. In 2010, her yarn earned her the Excellence in Product Design Award at the Atlantic Craft Trade Show in Halifax and in 2011 she was the recipient of the Newfoundland and Labrador Craft Council's Award for Outstanding Achievement.

Now at the age of 60, O'Hagan is content to support herself as a professional craftsperson and as a teacher. (She regularly teaches a stagecraft course at the Sir Wilfred Grenfell campus of Memorial University.)

She has also recently started a new art project because she realized that while she enjoys the meditative nature of spinning, it wasn't giving her that 'big exciting feeling' that goes hand in hand with the adventure of making art.

Her new works are small scale, using wet felting with embroidery, beading and appliqué. In terms of theme, they reflect her current mindset.

"They are about celebration of where I am right now, emotionally, physically, spiritually, and the life that I have created," she said.



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