

CHAPTER 2: THE ARTIST APPROACH

There are countless factors that contribute to one's life as an artist. How does the artist become inspired? What influences in an artist's life bring colour to the canvas? Why do we even make art at all? In "The Necessity of Art" by Ernst Fischer (2010), author John Berger challenges readers to answer this question: "Why do humans create art?"

Mondrian believed that art provided a completeness for the self that was lacking in some way. Is art "a means of putting man in a state of equilibrium with the surrounding world?" (p.15). This would suggest that artists are individuals who do not experience an equilibrium with the natural world around them. I cannot speak for others, but in fact, I can see the truth of this statement in my own life. Art is and always has been a means of understanding the world around me. My art is a conglomeration of childhood experiences, adult influences and more recently, my changing life circumstances as I move from married mother of two young children to single artist and teacher --a woman of middle age I am told --whose children are learning the process of independence. Thus, my present life circumstances are woven into the colour and form of painted images. All of these factors are affected by place and self --my individual experience as a woman and someone who is deeply affected and rooted by the land.



(fig.2)

FORMATION OF SELF, INFLUENCES AND METHOD

When I was younger, I used to work almost entirely in my sketchbook. I would sketch various images from life, whether at camp, traveling, or at the cottage. My older brother, already an accomplished realist, mentored me as I studied his precise graphite drawings. I was also fortunate to have two grandmothers who were hobby artists. Both grandmothers spent time with me encouraging art endeavours, taking me to the art galleries and sharing their oil painting inspirations. Even today, my paternal grandmother is symbolically present in the woven fabric, burlap and pink blanket series. The farm where my father's parents lived, provided solitude and a connection to the land that I could not have experienced living in the city. My siblings and I spent much of our time on the farm, learning how to care for sheep. We built character through chores and traditional domestic work. In addition to family influences, there was the ever present guidance from my art teacher. My parents signed me up for painting classes at the age of 8 and this significant event provided me with an important teacher, friend and mentor: Doreen Snyder. Doreen taught me how to paint traditional pastoral landscapes using acrylic paint. Her influence came from her brother in law, Peter Etril Snyder, a successful impressionist landscape painter who focussed on his traditional Mennonite heritage.

Although my mother and father were not artists, they instilled in the four of us, a keen appreciation for the natural world. My father, a well known geologist, professor emeritus at the University of Waterloo, introduced us to the land by taking us on field trips across Southern Ontario. We spent countless hours digging at the side of highways, and

studying fossil and rock samples. My mother, a biology graduate and former librarian at the Royal Ontario Museum, was also interested in the natural world. Although she gave up her career to raise the four children, she continued to educate us by creating mini-science labs at home. We raised caterpillars and tagged monarchs for migratory routes and we created incredible science fair projects that gave birth to scientific curiosity. For me, the appreciation of nature was an intimate experience --studying rocks at my feet, learning the names of indigenous plants on the forest floor, and identifying tiny animals and plants in eco-systems such as ponds and tidal pools.

Not surprisingly, the artists who influenced me throughout life, were the great realists as well as female artists who responded to the land. The first artist with whom I developed a keen appreciation was Ken Danby. My first art project in grade five was about Ken Danby, I carefully copied 10 of his drawings as part of the project. I still have those drawings today.



A 'Nice' Urban Garden, mixed media, 12 x 16. (fig.3)

While walking through the neighbourhood in the winter, I was intrigued by a messy and chaotic yard. I took photos and worked on this collage-like composition. The birdhouse was exactly like my grandfather's. I used to watch him feed the chickadees from the east window. I can still see his gloved hand lifting the lid as he whistled to the birds. The chickadees perched on his hand while I sat motionless in the window.

Some say an artist learns by copying and then develops a style by nurturing the imagination. Indeed, my style has developed largely through Ken's work. I knew everything about him and followed his career throughout his life. He was the quintessential artist of rural Ontario and held dear to his heart, environmental preservation and family values. My favourite piece of his was the great self portrait. It boldly stands at life size and depicts Ken in rich perfect brush strokes. He looks into the viewer's eyes, almost challenging and holds his left hand out in a gesture reminiscent of God's Hand in the creation of Adam on the Sistine chapel ceiling. Ken had the artist ego, as he showed himself the creator (like God himself), creating his own masterpiece in the self portrait. He was a great realist when the fashion was elsewhere and proved that behind any good realist work, there is a successful abstract composition.

My childhood sketches were complete in themselves. When I saw Ken Danby's polished drawings as well as my brother's, I concluded this approach was the way to draw. My sketches became very polished images that were contained in the sketchbooks. It wasn't until University that I began to take the rough sketches and use them for further development, mainly painting. Early paintings produced in my youth began right on the canvas using the brush and some watered down black paint as the under-sketch.

As a young adult I was very influenced by the process used by Doris McCarthy and the Group of Seven. These artists began with sketches that lead to loose colour compositions, usually on small boards or paper. Later, in the studio, more advanced and

often slightly abstract compositions developed from the early work. My process is similar. I begin with an idea or inspiration and I write about it in my journal on the computer. Then a quick sketch is drawn in the sketchbook. Afterwards, I paint a small study in watercolour. If I am happy with it, I move on to a detailed, larger work in acrylic. Occasionally there are exceptions to the rule. Sometimes I start right on the canvas drawing with my paintbrush. While other times, I work up a watercolour that is detailed and complete.

NARRATIVE

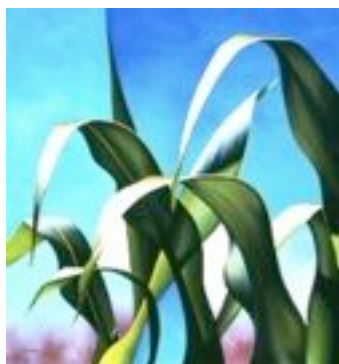
My brother once told me that my art embodies a passage of time. I can see that there is an acknowledgement of time and place. By focussing on these concepts, a narrative develops in the work. I remember a series of paintings that were inspired by the family farm. My grandmother's stories of her childhood, my own experience on the farm and the values given to us by both grandparents found expression in my art. I painted images from the past, mixing memory with imagination.

In University I began a body of work that lasted several years. I was interested in illustrating my Christian faith using narratives with symbols and children. This phase was then replaced by a new interest in the environment. After my daughter was born, I painted urban scenes where nature and humans came together in a strange and geometric urban environment.

Conservation and protection emerged as themes in my art as I read about environmental changes and studied the writings of John Grande (environmental art critic

from Montreal). I was interested in the story of the Ontario landscape beginning with old growth trees followed by European settlers (including my ancestors) clearing the land for farming, and finally, the growth of cities and urban sprawl, where farm land is replaced by subdivisions. My paintings read as cautionary tales and became political tools for change. Somewhere during this time, I fell in love with corn. As I painted environmental images, I sat and studied corn blowing in the wind. The sculpted curves of leaves, light and shadow and the invisible wind that seemed to celebrate life itself, moved me beyond words. Then all I painted was corn, realistically and abstract. While I painted corn, I was longing for a new home, a place away from the city where I could

CORN *Modern Ancient Staple Luxury*



Poised, acrylic, 30 x 32.
(fig.4)
Abstraction -folds blowing in
the wind, like eel grass.



Encroachment, wc, 19 x 29. (fig.5)
The corn is growing around
streetlights prophesizing the
subdivisions where farmland once
was.

idealize my pastoral dreams and return to more natural roots. The corn became a sensual story of nature and life cycles. My own sensuality became part of the story of the corn. Lacking intimacy in my life, I found intimacy in painting. We moved out west when I listened to the even deeper call from the land of Haida Gwaii.

The narrative I am presently in, is a place of change, uncertainty, and a continued interest in the environment. I am looking for insight in women's stories --matriarchs from our tiny community. I want to gather their stories and share this collective knowledge. I want to heal from my own personal pain and I know that I can do this through painting.

Throughout my life, my art has both mirrored events and also directed me. I am only content when I can create. It completes me. So for now, I will remain the anemone, until I find a way to move myself without breaking the connection I have to Haida Gwaii.

THEMES

Generally I become fascinated by something because it is beautiful and different to me. I have fallen in love with trees, soil, fences, corn, skunk cabbage, fossils, eel grass, shells and most recently, the sea anemone. The more I study something, the more I see. This process of uncovering the mysteries of something requires at first, actual documentation in the form of illustrative studies as I get to know my subject. Then realistic compositions emerge, soon to be followed by a rhizomatic explosion of various points of view on this subject.

When I was about 3 years old, I remember running around in the wind. I can picture the hill I was standing on next to my house on Mohawk St. My memory is clear --I am running and running, feeling the powerful wind lifting me up and I fly off the ground. I am lifted into the air. This is a memory and not a dream. I still dream about it today though. When I paint the corn leaves, I become the corn, lifted and suspended. And when I paint

the eel grass, I am floating through the water, lifted and suspended. I am what I paint. I become what I want to be.

The corn, both male and female, represents the fullness of nature's cycles. I painted the corn in different stages of maturity and these paintings developed into more abstract compositions playing with the corn leaf and the blue space of the sky. The corn was symbolic of early human agriculture, today biofuel and in general an unsustainable resource that is used for almost everything. As Michael Pollan aptly said, author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, "humans are walking corn."

Stalks and Planes,
wc, 14 x 20. (fig.6)

The corn in the foreground is woven into the patchwork fields of the background. Cubist lines displace levels of distance and repeat the angled lines of the stalks. The moving corn leaves symbolize the energy of the land. The unseen wind is the breath of life.



Tears of Hope,
wc, 12 x 16. (fig.7)

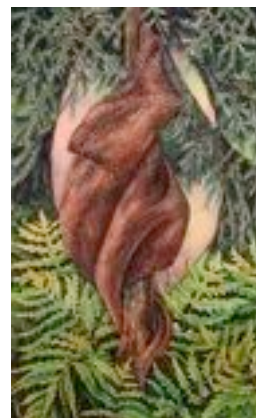
The totem now replaces the corn as it anchors the foreground. Eel grass moves and connects different levels of distance as the corn leaves once did. A new place: Haida Gwaii, gives fresh meaning and subject to earlier expression.



BURLAP

After our first trip out west, I returned to an isolated Ontario winter. Cold and windy days can be hard on urban plants. Urbanists like to prepare their garden for winter. One of these rituals involves taking rolls of burlap and wrapping them around trees and shrubs. Unlike the huge cedars from the west that seem to grow against all odds, these

struggling Charlie Brown-like saplings needed protection from snowdrifts and wind. The wrapped cedars became a fascination for me. I drew and painted images of these shrubs wrapped up for the winter. The forms seemed almost comically human and ghostlike. I began to use burlap in the studio wrapping it into circles and forms that hinted at humanity. Layering and transparency became techniques that challenged my artistic training. I painted images of mature west coast cedar also wrapped in burlap. The burlap is now a metaphor for protection, revealing and concealing. Again, it illustrates my own need for intimacy and my female identity.



Protection, wc, 14 x 20.
(fig.8)

Burlap is wrapped around a mature sitka spruce, the protection is no longer needed yet holds fast. A female presence is evident in the lozenge shaped halo and the maidenly foreground fern.

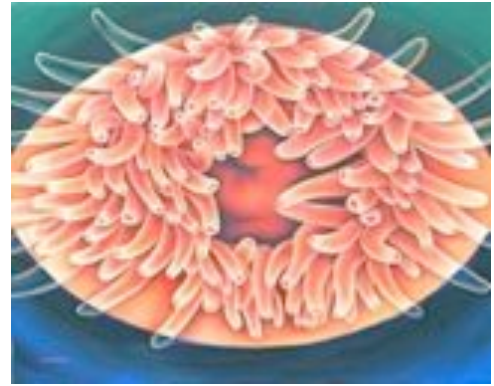


Waiting for Healing,
performance art (fig.9)

The tree is surrounded by an ineffective protective fence. Urban development (human interference with nature) has compromised the root system. I see the tree and try to help it by wrapping burlap around its trunk. The tree and I wait for help. Godot never comes, but the answer lies in the pieces of garbage caught in the fence. We have the capacity to solve our global environmental crisis. The pieces of paper are put into the recycling bin. Ideas can be recycled, old knowledge can become new knowledge.

THE ANEMONE

The anemone is me. It has gone through different phases --the complete form giving and gaining energy in its chosen place, the expansive form searching out connections with another being, the alien form, an entity that is beautiful yet dangerous, and the contracting form, hiding from pain --both prey and predator.



Ocean Blossom, acrylic, 16 x 20. (fig.10)

DEVELOPMENT OF A PAINTING

Using my paintings I will create a visual narrative describing the painting process.



(fig.11)



Above are samples of my painting process. I set up the composition using a back board, staples and burlap. After the still life was in place, I photographed it in the event the real subject had to be moved. I then began to paint the composition. Using watered down black acrylic paint, I brushed in the form, working out the positive and

negative space before colours were added. Next, I added base colours, meaning flat local colours to fill in the form. Later, layers of transparent colour using colour

‘temperature’ were painted until the detail could be added at the end. I painted the burlap strands, and in the spaces you can see the strands underneath. This fine work is more like pettipoint and takes countless hours. I worked inch by inch. The end result is a finely painted fabric that you can see through, mimicking real life but strangely different. These works are symbolic and meditative,



Madonna and Child, acrylic, 32 x 34,. (fig.12)

building out from a central focal point that quiets the soul. Eye movement is reduced, except for the gently curving folds of the sensual fabric that draws the eye in. The space becomes the focal point --endless, limitless and unknowable. In the dark we see nothing while we see everything. Only our imagination limits what we can see.

THE PROTECTION SERIES (Burlap and trees)

This series developed from my initial fascination with burlap and wrapping trees. While running one evening in my neighbourhood, I noticed these wrapped shrubs. Later, I returned to various sites and photographed the strange wrapped forms from many different view points. Generally I take between 30 and 40 pictures to source my work. I reference the photos rather than copy directly. For this work, I set up branches and

burlap in the studio to obtain the detail that was lacking in the photos. I made quick sketches and then began on a watercolour painting of burlap around trees. These works are no longer available for documenting. As the year progressed, I became more and more discontent with living in Ontario. I longed for fresh air, the dampness of the old growth forest and the smell of the ocean. We decided as a family to move out west. Once the decision was made, I painted a very personal image in an effort to visualize my feelings. This image surprised even myself. I did not plan it as I had other works. I remember doing a quick sketch in my sketchbook and then I just started painting. I set up burlap under a spot light and shaped it into the form I wanted. The totem was from a photo I had taken the summer before near Kitwanga. I was pleased with the work and framed it right away. Within a week, it was sold. I had put it on display with my other work for a show in a restaurant. A young geologist bought it. His mother had just died



leaving him some inheritance. He bought it in honour of her and because he had found a new way of living through the first nations animistic beliefs. The image became a symbol of his rebirth as well as mine. This painting later won recognition in an online art Symbolist show in B.C. Sometimes an image is ready to be born and the artist is merely the facilitator. I was fortunate to be there when the muse struck.

Reborn, wc, 9 x 12. (fig.13)

SKUNK CABBAGE SERIES

A few years ago, I painted a body of work describing my personal connection to the land. In the spring on Haida Gwaii, the skunk cabbage blooms amidst the neutral earth tones of the forest. The flower's brilliant yellow seems out of place and almost tropical in form and hue.



(figs. 14, 15, 16)
Left: Sketch from my journal for a watercolour study. It later became an acrylic painting.
Below: Sketch to become an acrylic painting in the future.
Right: Finished acrylic painting from a watercolour study and sketch.

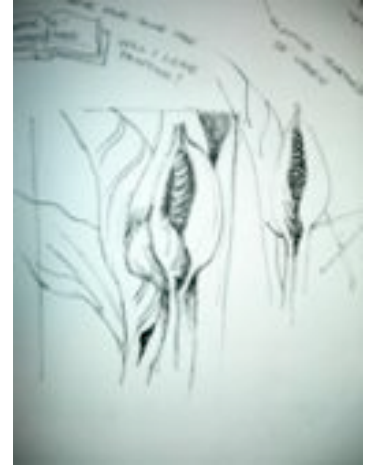


Forest Light, acrylic, 16 x 20. (fig.17)



Skunk Cabbage, acrylic, 18 x 36. (fig.18)

I first noticed the yellow flowers while running near Skidegate. After my run, I got into the car and took a series of photographs of the plant. I worked up some quick sketches on site and continued my experience in the studio. Below are samples of the process, beginning with early sketches in my journal, followed by watercolour studies and finally, more developed acrylic paintings.



(fig.19)

Part of my creative response to something is to write about it. I have included some of the written responses to accompany the image.

When using photos for reference, I am aware that the colour and perspective are changed from the original. In the case of the skunk cabbage, the simple palette of yellow and green in the photos seemed more intense and saturated than they were in real life. I prefer the stronger colours when painting in the acrylic medium. Whenever possible, I will bring objects back into the studio so I can work from life. I used to bring corn back and worked with real stalks but with something like a skunk cabbage, one must be sensitive to the plant. It will die if I pick it. I take photos of the living things unless I am doing plein air work.

If someone asked me where my ideas for paintings comes from, I would ask them to join me for a run. When I am running, my senses are more attuned. I smell, see, hear and feel more than at other times during the day. Because of this, I feel more responsive to stimuli. As I am running down the highway viewing the landscape, I am

inspired by what is around me. In my journal I wrote,

“The only way to see a landscape is to be part of it.”

Here is an except from a story I wrote about running:

Snow collects on my face, gathering in clumps around my eyebrows melting down my cheeks. The salty taste of the flakes remains a mystery to me. I assume it has something to do with running so close to the ocean in a blizzard. My eyes are stinging from the slashing motion of the wind and sleet. I am masked by my hat and neck warmer, revealing only a sliver of skin across my eyes. The adjacent islands and the road beneath me are obscured by snow. My heart beats evenly - a lulling rhythm of breath, heart and feet propel me forward into a dream of energy. My mind races... with creative ideas, memories, old conversations, and tasks to be completed. Life lessons occur when you run. I have examined corpses of animals over time, intimately passing them each day, wondering if I was the only one who noticed the loss of life.

For some painters the studio space is essential in the creation of their art. I have produced many successful paintings right at the kitchen table. Although I do have a studio space, I can produce art where-ever necessary. I like solitude and a view of the natural world. My regular life is very structured and tidy. I keep an aesthetically organized home with attention to detail and beauty. All facets of my life are in order, except for the studio. In this space, I do not



(fig.20)

care how things are placed. Images are lazily tacked onto the wall, books are sitting out and paints are strewn everywhere. I do not want the responsibility of keeping my work space clean when I have that task in other areas of my life. I give myself permission to do what I want in my studio space. It is a place of function and escape. I even write my ideas on the table surface.

THE SEA ANEMONE

Three years ago I painted a watercolour of sea anemones. I thought I was done with this image, having moved on to several tree compositions and other tidal pool images. Then, the anemone appeared again, this time full of life and energy. I was reading Eckhart Tolle and was thinking about his ideas on flowers. In my journal I wrote:



Sea Anemones, wc, 12 x 16. (fig.21)

I remember one of my favourite professors told us to never paint flowers. He believed it was impossible to paint a flower well because they are overdone, over stylized and over marketed. So, I did not paint flowers until recently. Now I can see the original beauty in their form and I am not afraid to capture their fullness of life.

I painted my first flower images during this time: the skunk cabbage, a still-life of an antherum and the sea anemone. The anemone is the ocean flower; although an animal in design, it appears plant-like in many ways. The first expressive anemone painting was *Extraneous Flower*, followed by *Ocean Blossom*, *Chosen Place*, *Interface*, *Abstraction of Anemone*, *Plastic Anemone* and *Today's Catch*. *Plastic Anemone* is an

environmental image with tiny cut pieces of water bottles sewn onto the canvas. I like the contrast between these sharp glass-like bits juxtaposed with the soft fleshy anemone. The most recent anemone was produced in Photoshop. I took *Chosen Place* and reworked it, moving the anemone underwater and adding a crab.

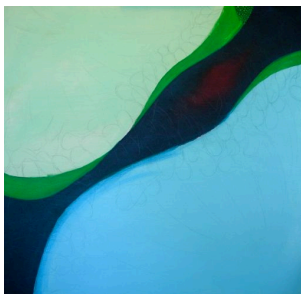


Extraneous Flower

acrylic, 26 x 27. (fig.22)

The first in a series of central and confrontational flowering anemone images. Ocean motifs give movement to the background, leading the viewer into the middle focal point.

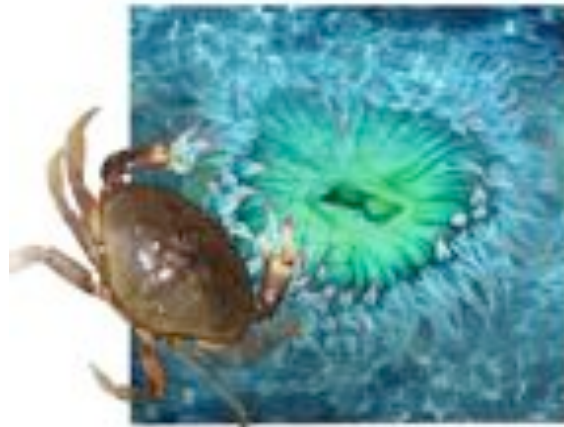
Stages of development for ***Interface***, acrylic, 3 x 5 ft (fig.23)



The anemone is in its own safe environment. The fence is symbolic of constraint and barriers, yet here the fence acts as a barrier to destruction. The crab, with its hard outer shell, unlike the spineless anemone, is pulling off the tentacles --a slow and painful death for the anemone.



Chosen Place, acrylic, 32 x 34.
(fig.24)
This fence was taken from an earlier painting called *A Nice Urban Garden*. The fence represents divisions in thinking, and barriers to new ideas. The fence is both an environmental and personal symbol.



Chosen Place II. Digital Image.
(fig.25)
The fence is larger now, acting as a protecting wall rather than a barrier to freedom.

The anemone is a metaphor for my life --a creative entity giving and obtaining energy in its chosen place. Anemones are so foreign to humans, yet when I look at one, I relate to it through my female experience. The anemone is everything --vortex, interface, and radiating energy.

The painting titled, *Plastic Anemone* was created while visiting a friend in Terrace. I enjoyed the background far more than the anemone itself, so I continued the abstracted idea of tentacles in the next painting called *Abstraction of Anemone*. Later, I drew a sketch using these tentacle shapes and added buttons, similar to the sewn plastic pieces.



Above: layering transparent process for Plastic Anemone (fig.26)

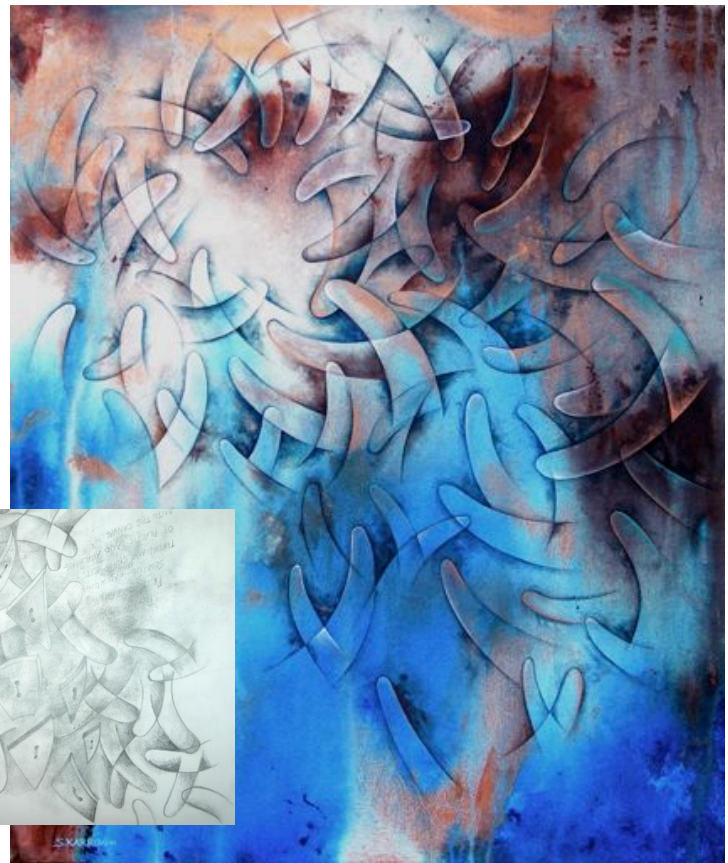
Right: **Plastic Anemone**, acrylic and plastic, 28 x 36. (fig.27)

Below: Detail of anemone tentacles that later comprised a new composition (fig.28)

Below Right: **Abstraction of Anemone**, acrylic, 16 x 24. (fig.30)



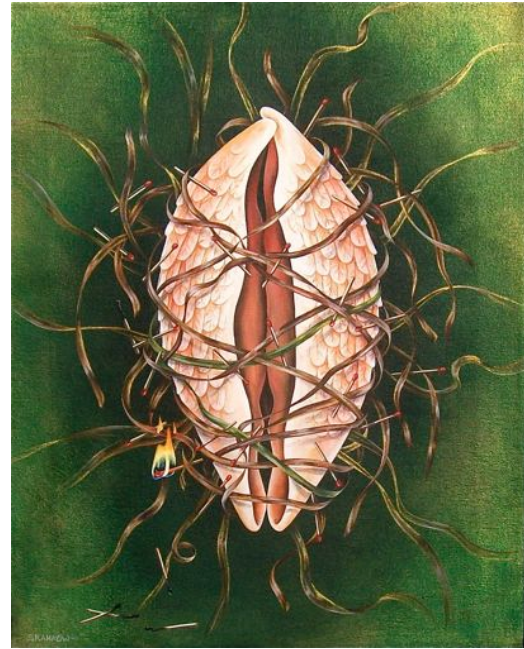
Right: Cubist buttons and tentacles. (fig.29)



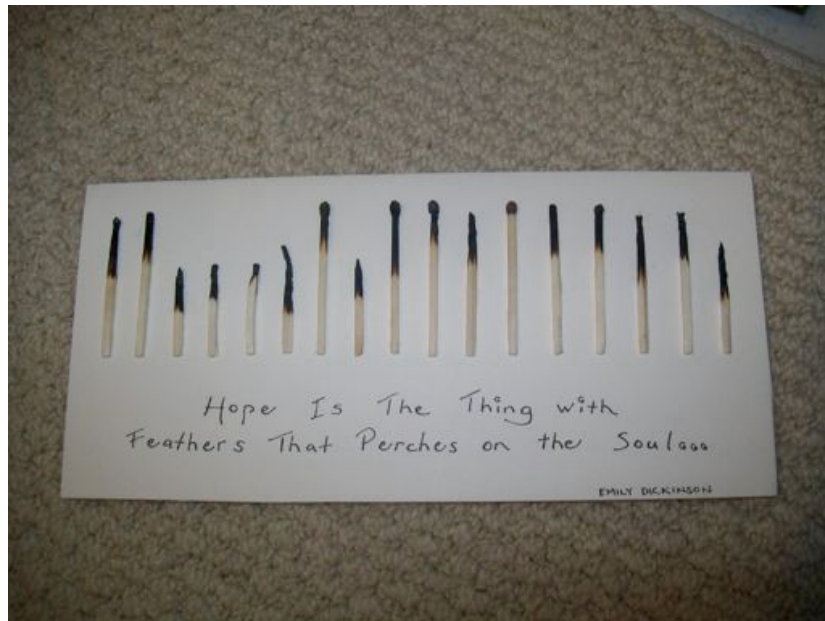
PROGRESSION OF AN IDEA INTO A REALITY

As part of the anemone/oceanic series, the painting titled, *Angel Shell* aptly shows all facets of my artistic life: realist, surrealist and symbolist. I wanted the image of the shell to be confrontational, to challenge the viewer to accept my female identity as something that is both assertive yet sensitive. The shell is partly open and vulnerable. Pieces of eelgrass enter the composition from all sides, leading the viewer directly to the center where movement is halted. Inside the shell there is a soft fleshy interior, while the outside of the shell morphs into angel wings. This apparent ambiguity leaves the viewer to decide whether the shell is in a state of becoming free or rather bound by external forces. The area around the light match is not constrained. I wanted the light match to counter the shell's central position resulting in an unresolved narrative. Old burnt matches have fallen to the bottom of the painting suggesting past efforts have failed. The metallic gold and emerald green background creates a luxurious backdrop for the shell to emerge from. Rich colours give the painting a sacred quality indicating this object is a rare and precious commodity. As seen in most of my images, there is a duality in the masculine and feminine symbols creating tension between the two sides. The wings on the shell could be read as a flying soul. In many religions, the soul taking flight is both a spiritual and physical process.

The shell might be a metaphor for the soul trying to become free --the final flight. Three elements of nature are present: earth, air and fire. The shell rises from the earth, takes flight and is released by fire. This painting style is reminiscent of old masters' images of still life on a table. This composition is finely painted in a realist style, yet the picture is



Above: Development of **Angel Shell** (fig.33)
 Top Right: completed painting, **Angel Shell**, acrylic, 16 x 20. (fig.34)
 Right: Mounted below the painting is a small sign that reads, "Hope is the thing with wings that perches on the soul" by Emily Dickinson. The burnt matches used for reference while painting the flame are mounted on the sign. One match is not yet light. I frequently use traditional images of symbology in my work. (fig.35)



When I am assimilating a composition in my mind, I find myself thinking about Thomas Berry's words. In *The Dream of the Earth* (1988). Berry described Dante's reconnection with Beatrice after purgatory as rekindling an "ancient flame" that was relight from deep within him. Dante's experience symbolizes "the entire human community at the moment

of reconciliation with the divine after a long period of alienation and human wandering away from the true centre" (p. 2). When I paint, I go to a place where I can heal, but even more so, I try to create a place where the viewer can reconnect with the land and sea. Berry compares Dante's rekindled love to that of the human spirit, finding his place once again within the natural world. We realize our intimate role with nature by exercising humility, passion, and sacrifice. I hope my art can instill "something of this feeling of intimacy we now experience as we recover our presence within the earth community." (Berry, p. 2).