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WINTER 2009/10

Spirit of Art

Carrie Neiss of Joshua Gallery

SPINNING A MYSTERY ON MAYNE ISLAND

EVERYTHING GLITTERS WITH MARTINUS

ARTS | PEOPLE | NATURE | FOOD | GETAWAYS | FASHION



Cover Story





Joshua Gallery

By CHERIE THIESSEN

Photos by John Bagshaw Art images from Carrie Neiss

It's all about surprises.

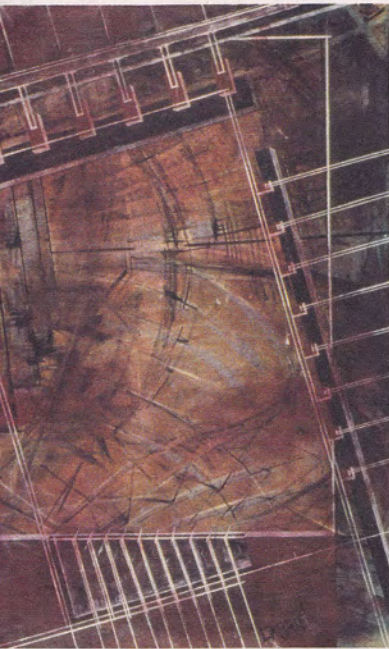
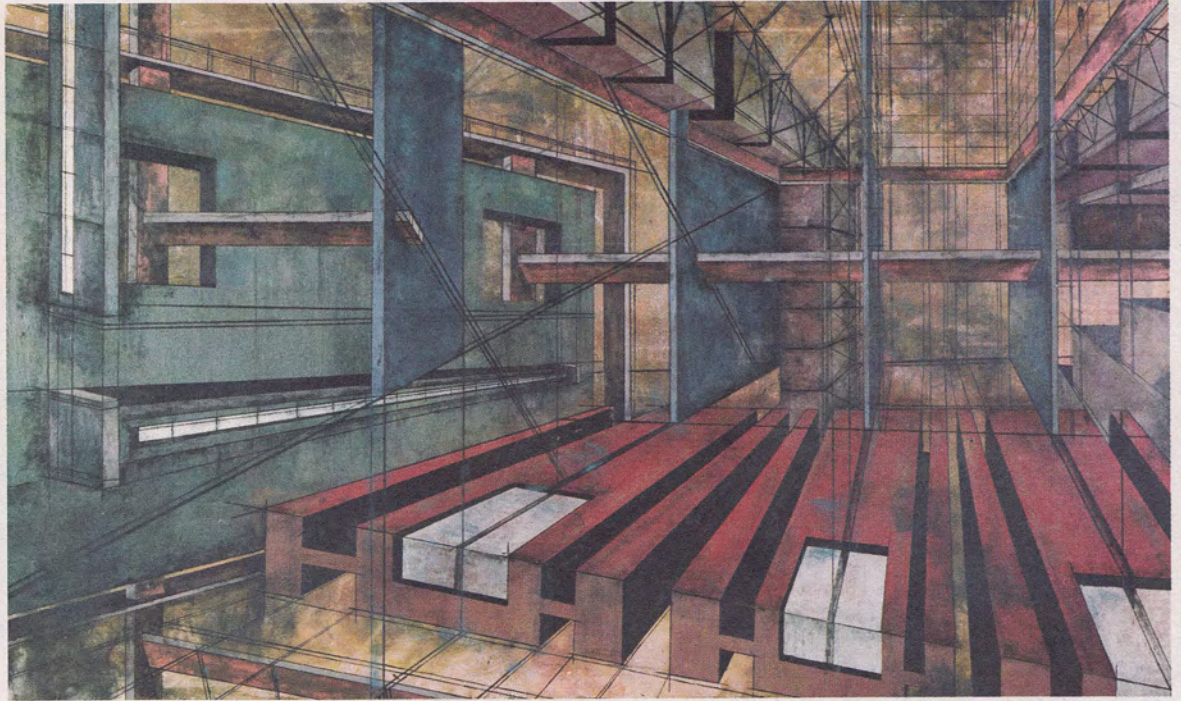
I just don't expect an artist to be hidden in the depths of a 50-acre property on rural South Pender. I park in the fields and set off to find the gallery, a huge, tree-hugged, bright blue building.

Then, I don't expect such a young woman. She greets me at the door, dressed in work boots, paint-stained pants and a very large man's shirt. She's slight, attractive and appears to be in her late 20s. I've seen Carrie Neiss' work and it's the product of a very experienced, very skilled (read: mature) painter. She tells me she's 42 and I'm stunned.

And then there's the gallery. I would never have anticipated such an enormous area to showcase one artist: 1,400 square feet of airy and almost cathedral-like dimensions.

After a hushed moment I realize the art displayed on these walls actually commands this kind of space and this amount of air to breathe them in. Seeing her work on the website is nothing like viewing it in "real space." I know this is true of any art, but there's an energy that

EMERGING SOULS FIND THEIR WAY THROUGH CARRIE NEISS



Opening spread: Carrie Neiss works on *The Artists*.
At right: *Blue Joshua*.

Above, clockwise from top left:
Works from Carrie Neiss' *Green and Architecture* series —
Column, *Piano Keys* and
Centrifugal Force.

emanates from her work, a three-dimensional quality. When you walk in here you feel compelled to take off your shoes and speak in whispers. It's a spiritual sanctuary.

When I begin to ask questions, another surprise: she tells me she has never been interviewed before. How can an artist practising for 17 years, and with this level of artistic accomplishment, have never been interviewed?

We talk about where she was born, Montreal, and how she came to art.

"As a kid, I knew I had a talent to draw, but it wasn't a career goal. Everyone in the '80s was getting Bachelors' of Commerce, so off I went to McGill to get mine. At 21, after graduating, I asked myself: Do you really want to be doing this for the next 25 years? I had been planning on getting an MBA, but instead I said to my dad: I can't do it. I have to go to architecture school."

Why architecture?

"Because architecture is art in many ways. We have an emotional reaction to buildings. My practical side was still thinking: I can still have a profession and practise art. The only school that would accept me, interestingly enough, was an art school that had an architecture department, Rhode Island School of Design."

It's where her life changed and she learned to look at space in an artistic way. This training would show up clearly in her later architecture series, fantastical constructions that

combine discipline and whimsy, a successful series for her.

"My buyers are frequently business people who buy art for their offices. They went crazy over the architecture stuff."

The student nudged closer to her destiny when the school sent her for what she calls "boot camp art training" in Providence for one ecstatic summer.

Not surprising, therefore, that when she got an office job with an architecture firm, she hated it with a passion.

"An anger started to appear in my heart. So one weekend, I bought some supplies, turned on my music and painted." Then came the epiphany. "The moment I put my hand on that little piece of canvas I was purely happy from head to toe."

Neiss had found her path.

She chooses her words carefully, hesitantly, aware that she is speaking of an unconscious way of creating that may have skeptics shaking their heads.

"I hadn't known what was good for me, but now my instinct was telling me, Carrie, you have to paint! I definitely was not going to try to influence or analyze that. Obviously that first paint stroke was a gift and I didn't want to get in the way of that."

Her artistic journey is documented in several journals displayed at the back of the gallery, which meticulously chronicle her path. Each spans roughly three years of creative work.



Above: *Josh and Sybill*, one of Neiss' figure paintings.

First, she moved into straight lines, creating that popular series called Architecture. Then came the Green Series, so called because she saw it as her growing phase, a metamorphosis.

"It was a journey. There's a depth to this phase, like a tunnel. At the end of it, I couldn't paint another painting and went into this artistically dismal period. I knew from experience that my practical mind was not going to give me the answer. I picked up some paper and a pen and — what do you see here?"

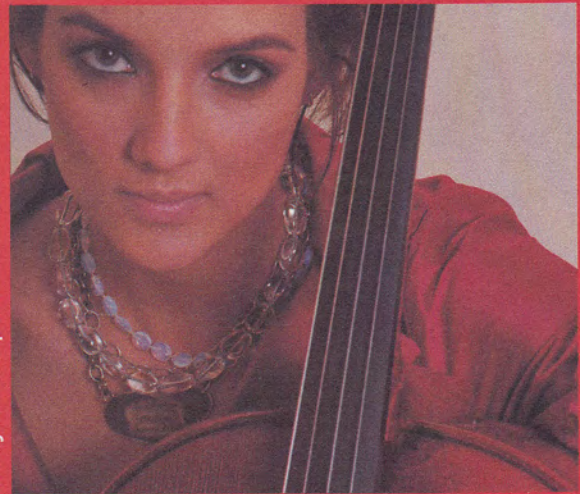
We have moved on to the next journal, containing her Black and White series. I see people coming out of shells. Neiss describes this phase as her diary of sorts. She offers this work as giclees (reproductions using ink jet technology), but the original works are too close to her heart to sell. In one of these images I see the shadows of the people who will later dominate her work. The artist describes them as people separating from their souls, becoming more human. One of these emerging souls will surface in many of her paintings.

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Above: Carrie Neiss hangs up the open sign for Joshua Gallery.

She calls him Joshua, her gallery namesake.

“Joshua to me is an archetype spiritual soul coming from the Bible, but not religious. He’s a power greater than us. Joshua is a dedication to my artistic process, my spiritual guide.”

And yet Neiss does not intentionally draw him. In fact, she iterates that none of her art is conscious, and that strikes me as the final and most incredible surprise.

Her works mainly show people from historical periods; many visitors think Italian Renaissance. I see Galileo at work. I see Joan of Arc. There’s Romeo and Juliet, and Drake seems to loom on the horizon in another, but they’re way more nebulous than that. They’ve created themselves.

How did this self-effacing artist make her way to the Gulf Islands? That’s one of my more mundane questions.

“I heard that B.C. was beautiful and I needed a change. Our realtor said, ‘Have you heard of the Gulf Islands? They have the most artists per capita in Canada.’ I also wanted to build my own gallery, and she said there was land in the islands, so I moved here and rented a little cottage in 2003.” Later on she moved to her present sylvan location, where her quest for

peace and solitude has been successful.

A private person, Neiss confesses that it can be challenging to switch from art to life, but she’s up for it. This year has seen her involved in some of the Penders’ popular artists’ events, including everyone’s favourite, Art off the Fence, held each July.

The artist sells her limited edition fine arts prints through her excellent and regularly updated website — www.joshuaartgallery.com.

The studio is open every weekend in summer or by appointment (250-629-2078).

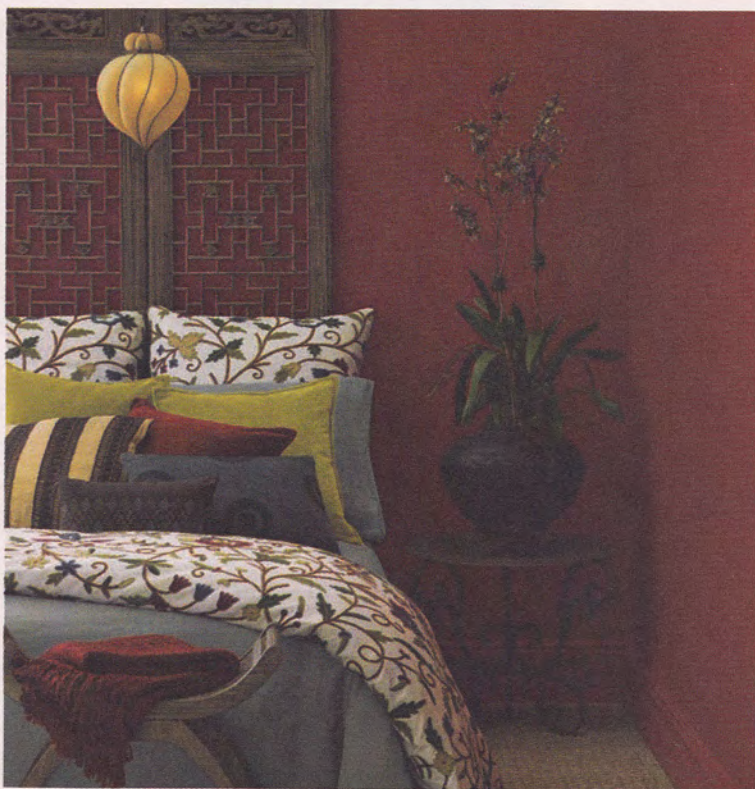
I finally make my farewell, knowing that Carrie will instantly return to putting the finishing touches on *The Artists*, a huge, convoluted, 30” x 60” canvas dominating the back half of her studio that’s been 10 months in progress.

“I love putting figures into fantasy spaces,” she’s told me, and the seven figures reading and relaxing in this interior dreamscape seem happy there.

I wander back through the fields, trying to get my head — or maybe it’s my soul — around her words.

“I’m just a medium for this. I don’t decide what I put on the canvas.”

It has been a visit replete with surprises. ✨



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