

ARTS — NEWS — ATTITUDE

14 — 27 APRIL 2016 4.08 FREE

THE LONDON YODELLER



Honouring Bernice Vincent

COMPILED AND EDITED BY
BY BOB MCKENZIE

MY FRIEND of 55 years, Bernice Vincent, died at Victoria Hospital late in the evening of Friday, March 25, 2016, at the age of 82. Like other friends who are now gone, Greg Curnoe, Jack Chambers, Hugh McIntyre, and Bernice's husband, Don Vincent, she was unique and unforgettable. I am not qualified to speak with any expertise about her art, but I can say that, like Bernice herself, her work was always intelligent and beautiful. Here is what two of Bernice's friends said about her life and work at her funeral on March 30.

BILL EXLEY

Vocalist in the Nihilist Spasm Band

Bernice was born on March 6, 1934 in Woodstock, Ontario, the only child of Dorothy and Charles Goodsell. She later said that she felt repressed as a child, and decided in Kindergarten to become an artist. After Grade 12 at Woodstock Collegiate in 1952 she enrolled in the Special Art programme at Beal in London. She even did some art modelling there, as can be seen in a photo of Bernice in a bathing suit with Hugh MacKenzie in the book, *bealart*. Don Vincent had already graduated from the programme, but at Jim Kemp's suggestion, she and Don worked together on a brochure for the Western Art League. Shortly after that Bernice won a scholarship to

study art in Mexico. Don went to Mexico, bought her a wedding ring there, and they were married one year later in 1956. They lived on Kent Street behind the Guild house, on Queens Avenue across from the old library, and for two years at 546 Dundas Street. From 1962 until Don's death in December, 1993 they lived at 23 Oregon Road, and Bernice continued to live there until December, 2015.

Life with Don Vincent brought new experiences into Bernice's life. She had a couple of jobs and worked briefly preparing window displays at Kingsmill's, but when she decided to have children, employment was harder to find, and she continued with her art. Her son Charles was born in 1965, and Esther in 1968. She did not do as much painting between 1966 and 1970, but after that time most of her amazing art was created. Don, who was a well-known photographer, had his darkroom in the basement, and Bernice had the studio with high windows, looking out onto the garden and gazebo.

The atmosphere of their home was congenial, where one might drop in on a discussion of politics, the London situation, music, art, or even hear Roy McDonald read "Rindercella" on Christmas Eve. I remember one evening when Don played many renditions of Pachelbel's famous canon, including some absurd modern ones, at which we all laughed. Their lively curiosity was matched by

a broad sympathy with other people. Bernice and Don were never people to condemn others, though Don loved to argue with them, and their hospitality included learning from people with whom they might be at odds. Don was a powerful personality, but Bernice maintained her own creativity. I thought it interesting that Bernice distinguished herself from Don, saying that she did not work from photographs, but from her own observations.

The night before Don's funeral, just a few days before Christmas Eve, a person said to Bernice that, of course, she would not be having Christmas Eve this year. Automatically Bernice said "no," and almost immediately corrected herself and said "yes, of course." Much living and art were yet ahead.

Bernice's modest and unpretentious manner attracted many good friends; for example, Dawn Johnston, who got her going out in the world, Barbara Pratten and the Wednesday lunch group of Art Pratten and Hugh McIntyre, after which grocery shopping often took place, and Bob McKenzie, who took her to concerts and operas.

Her main support in recent years, of course, has been Don Muller. He started to get to know her in 2000 when they met at a drawing group to which Dawn Johnston had brought her. Don Muller remembers Thanksgiving, 2002 as an important date in his getting to know her. They sat in the gazebo until two o'clock in the



Photo: Bob McKenzie

I'VE JUST NOTICED THAT MOST OF
THE PEOPLE I KNOW ARE WEIRD

morning. Her daughter Esther was pleased when on a visit to Peterborough she spoke of a gentleman she had met and wanted advice because, she said, "I haven't dated since the 1940s." She wanted to put her hand on his knee but was afraid to do it.

In recent years Don Muller brought her to very many gatherings, even after her dementia was recognized in approximately 2013. I do not recall her missing any of the Nihilist Picnics at Poplar Hill, including the 51st one, held last September. She and Don were regularly present at Eric Stach's many Friday night Jazz Series at 105 Clarence Street; and they were always there at the regular New Year's Eve Parties, begun by Greg Curnoe in December 1960 and continuing to the present. On December 31, 2014 both of them were there at the party held by James Reaney and Susan Wallace. My wife and I received postcards from Don and Bernice from Paris, France, where they visited the Pompidou Museum and other sites — and then another one from Paris, Ontario.

Even previous to these events, Bernice's in-

terest in the world led her into various adventures. She went to New York City in October, 2001, one month after 9/11, and before that in August, 1997, both times with the Nihilist Spasm Band, which in 1997 was playing at The Knitting Factory there. My

also about the Cloisters. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, when I asked at the entrance stalls about the price of admission, a man on duty several stalls away recognized my voice from recordings he had heard of the Nihilist Spasm Band and let the three of us in at no charge. When we told this story to the other members of the Band, they, of course, started to claim that their taxi fares and other expenses were also dismissed with the words "Nihilist Spasm Band: no charge," even though this was not true. Bernice, as always, took pleasure in such nonsense. As a matter of fact, a few years ago Bernice made the statement, "I've just noticed that most of the people I know are weird."

In an essay on Goya, Aldous Huxley contrasts



Photo courtesy of Thielsen Gallery

Bernice Vincent: *Travelling into Autumn*, 2007, acrylic on panel, 12 x 12 in

wife Norma accompanied her on walks in the city and said how interesting it was to look at the city through the eyes of an artist, as Bernice commented about details at the tops of buildings, and

artists who lived their lives producing good works which in later life were very similar to those which they did when they were young, to artists who never ceased to develop throughout their careers.

He speaks of those who have lived “without ever ceasing to learn of life.” “The field is relatively narrow; but within it, what astonishing ... treasures.” He could have been speaking of Bernice whose art moved through a series of distinct stages, always leading us to see things in new ways. One thinks of the domestic scenes of her early work, a painting of a cat or an ironing board, and then a painting like *Pearscape* in 1975 with its Magritte-like surrealism where the earth is made of pears below the sky. In 1993–94 she experimented with paint mixed with sand and dried plant materials, and she did another distinctive group of paintings about changing London, painting construction cranes over buildings; and, earlier, pictures of roads penetrating green nature. And *All Around Me — All Around You* from 1992–93, is one of many works concerned with time and change and the sky. Robert McKaskell said that she painted “the kinds of objects we know but seldom study.” Bernice herself said, “Every time I step out the door, it’s the beginning of an adventure.”

She was always concerned about the London arts community and the society we live in. In the 1950s she joined the Artists’ Workshop founded by Selwyn Dewdney. In 1962, together with Greg Curnoe, Jack Chambers, Larry Russell, Brian Dibb, Tony Urquhart, and Don Vincent she was a founding member of Region Gallery on Richmond Street. In 1966 she joined Greg Curnoe and Murray Favro as they removed their art from a London Art Gallery exhibition in protest against the decision that had been made not to allow John Boyle’s *Seated*,

Nude to be exhibited. And in the early 1990s she did her green painting of women, commemorating the 1989 massacre of women engineering students in Montreal. She did indeed live “without ever ceasing to learn of life.”

BRIAN LAMBERT

Musican, artist and Collections Manager at the McIntosh Gallery

I’m very honoured to be asked to talk about my friend Bernice as an artist. For someone who produced work for five or six decades her C.V. probably wouldn’t cover more than a few pages. Does that make her unsuccessful? Does that make her a bad artist? I think everyone here knows the answer. Bernice Vincent was an artist. To me that means that for her making art was an undeniable compulsion. Somewhere I saw a quote from Bernice that said, “You don’t have to go far to find something interesting,” and this is certainly reflected in her work.

I first met Bernice as a member of Forest City Gallery. I had just moved back to town and she was certainly one of the first senior artists I would have known — and Greg, of course. I got to know her a bit over the years, saw her stand up at meetings of Forest City for things that she really believed in. But mostly she was a quiet soul unless she had something that she really felt passionate about. The things she painted were quiet, diminutive, much like her.

For me the most interesting thing about Bernice, and getting to know Bernice, happened when I decided to take a hiatus from art and I started a business doing renovations. Of course, most of my clients were artists, art



Bernice Vincent: *The White Sheet*, acrylic on board, 91.4 x 121.9cm, 1984, McIntosh Gallery Collection, Western University

dealers. When Don died Bernice would call me to come in; she wanted to renovate the kitchen, so we did the kitchen. Over I don’t know how many years I was a regular at the house. I’d get there in the morning, she would welcome me, make me coffee. We’d have a chat, discuss what she wanted done, and I’d go do my work and she would go into her studio and do hers. She might stop to make some lunch or something, but she lived in her studio. She really was an artist. That’s what she did.

I was always taken by her work. There’s some-

thing really captivating about the different stages. Some of my absolute favourites are the early, what you’d call domestic works. At the McIntosh Gallery we have an absolutely fabulous painting, one of my favourite works by Bernice. It’s called *White Sheet*. It’s a picture of a sheet blowing in the wind on the line in the back yard. The sheet itself takes up most of the surface and around it is a painting of the yard. And I think that Bernice saw life and motion in all those small things and she was able to capture them in a way that was very powerful in spite of the fact

that they were diminutive subjects.

As I went there over the years I got to see Bernice working every day on different things. I see a lot of people here wearing one of her buttons which became very famous. She made a lot of them. If she didn’t have a big piece she wanted to work on she’d find something small to work on.

There was a bit of a lull in the workload. I think I had replaced every single floor in the house. I’d done the kitchen, a bathroom I think. So there had been a lull. I hadn’t seen her, I hadn’t seen her work, and I walked into

her studio and I saw this amazing thing. It was an entire wall of panels, each one with the silhouette of one of fourteen women, though only seven panels would fit on the wall of her studio. I didn’t know at the time the subject of the piece but I remember it being absolutely stunning in its visual impact. Now, it was a piece about the Montreal massacre, where all these women died, but they were all delicately drawn silhouettes. There was no indication of clothing, but there was no sexuality suggested either. I was really taken by the texture and I asked about it because every inch of each panel was covered with a rough surface. She had taken from the yard, scrapings, I don’t know if it was from the lawn mower or from whatever it was. The entire surface of each piece was covered and then painted, and it occurred to me when I was thinking about that piece, how beautiful it was on all sorts of levels, because, if you think about it, all fourteen women died, and she chose to use yard scraps as the base for it. It’s the eternal circle — you die, go into the ground, and then come up. To me, that piece is Bernice’s masterpiece. It can stand against any work, anywhere.






2016 LONDON ARTISTS’ STUDIO TOUR

April 15th
7 to 9:30 p.m.

April 16th
10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

April 17th
noon to 5 p.m.

This self-guided tour offers the public an extraordinary opportunity to meet local artists in their working environments and learn more about their creative processes. Tour-goers are treated to refreshments and first choice of the artists’ works.

INFORMATION: BETH STEWART 519-668-6743




BROCHURES AVAILABLE at MUSEUM LONDON and LIBRARY BRANCHES or ONLINE AT www.londonstudiotour.ca