

Sylvia Whitton. Artist Talk: **Mantels of Gaia**

The Gibson. Alliston Ontario. April 13, 2025

I would like to begin by..... and acknowledging the territories on which I have been privileged to live, and create, of the Haudenosaunee, the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabe and the Huron-Wendat, who are the original guardians and custodians of Toronto, where I was born and currently live. AS well, the Ojibwa and Odawa first nation territories up around the Ottawa Valley, where I first discovered that visual art was my language of choice; and finally, and most importantly, the **original** Sawge'en Nation territory, up in the Grey Bruce region, which is by far the most influential territory of my childhood and my creative psyche. I am of Northern English/Scottish descent (and somewhere a little Scandinavian as well...)

This exhibition started, I think, with a farm.

In 1961, at a time when people were buying cottages, my parents bought an old farm of 100 acres - house smack in the middle - in the Beaver Valley, south of the town of Meaford, ON., straight down the #7, running into the Beaver Valley Road. The Valley held farms on the west side (some here might remember the ski resort, Talisman) and on the east side, some cliffs with a section of the Bruce Trail along the top, and, when I was young, there was Old Growth Forest along the bottom.

On our way there, from Toronto, we would sometimes take the route through Alliston, for a very special break, at the DQ! Yes, that one, on King Street. Still there! And every single time I am again that 5-year-old, the window rolled down, with great hopes of a chocolate dip cone!

For at least 7 years, this was our home for the full two months of the summer holiday. It was actually quite isolated when I think of it now. There were no girls around, so my two brothers, one older, one younger, were my playmates, along with snails, and grasshoppers, spiders, and garter-snakes... The two fields, a sandpit, a shallow creek, the old barn, and the stands of trees, were very comfortable, reasonably safe spaces to play in, and "be" in, and think in. Piles of hay to jump in, kittens in the barn to cuddle, and, when you sat very still under Maple tree, and held your breath **and** a peanut –eventually, the chipmunk would come right up onto your knee to snatch the treat.

All this is important to this exhibition of work because it is the soil that nourished my sense of, and feelings for the tactile and sensual world. The warmth or coolness of earth, of wind, and of water. These impressions of the land were not flat, like on a screen, or constantly monitored with a thermostat. We were cold? we pulled on seaters. We were too hot, we played in the shade of a tree. We watched clouds and flocks of birds. We knew what the grey flatness of dusk looked and felt like.

There is a key memory from then: one day my big brother, David, and I went down the lane to the mailbox on Beaver Valley Road. Looking down the road, there was a little fawn by itself, right in the middle, stopped still and looking at us. We quietly moved towards it. It went into the Forest side – the old growth side. My big brother was very brave. He took my hand, and we – like a real Hansel and Gretel in the fairy tales - stepped into a world filtered in green light, with the rich smell of moss and moisture. And growing things. And decaying things. Sound was absorbed by the lush padding of the growth. The fawn moved into the forest, to its Mum, and then they melted into the shadows. We followed them just a little further, when suddenly a broad shaft of light on the left, opened a view of unearthly golden stillness... We just froze. It was so extraordinary; I have never forgotten it. Then the light faded. and we couldn't speak until we finally found our way back onto the road.

I feel that these experiences are the patterns of sensation that find their way into the manner in which I hold a brush, or draw a line; hold a child in my arms; or feel a yearning for something I can't immediately put my finger on...

One last point from that time - our mother would take us to the library at the beginning of the summer, and fill the car with books. Before bed – or on rainy days, she would read to us. She read a lot. Alongside Winnie the Pooh, Mary Poppins, and a little Zen Buddhism, she read from Shakespeare, and myths and the Bible stories of the sea parting, baby-killings, head-chopping, walls-crashing, plague sweeping: you know, the gruesome ones particularly entrancing to children. Many were Epic narratives, and as children do, I imagined them all happening in the environment at hand. My love of metaphor and archetypes surely has its roots here.

Anyway, stir **this** all up in a pot and we will end up with Shamhat's garden... but not just yet.

I studied Fine Art at the Ont. College of Art, with a particular emphasis on the drawing and the figure. I met many friends, and there I also met the true love of my life, John.

When artists graduate, there is always the question: how to make a living... and for us, and our friends, all of whom have remained in the arts **and** raised families ... the question is always ongoing. To support both the family and as best we can, the creative impulse, we waitress, we bartend, we work in construction, are landscapers, we work in the theatre, or museums or galleries, become framers, illustrate books, take on commissions, teach classes, and exhibit – and the artists I know, do and have done many of these things, sometimes concurrently, having to be flexible with the currents and economy that **is** the Arts. It keeps one limber.

I have just retired from teaching at OCAD University but to begin with I worked as a set painter for 13 years, with the Canadian Opera Company,

The painting techniques I learned involved applying multiple layers of texture, both printed and dimensional, of washes and spattering, and dry-brushing...there can be 20 or more layers of this, depending on the need. And this process of homogenizing, then fracturing the surface, was an excellent way to understand how to integrate 2 and 3 dimensions; how to understand colour contrast and colour sequencing; how to create a sense of depth to capture light; how to create the illusion of solidity, and earthly believability.

When I gave up the theater work, I spent some time learning how to adapt this process to my personal work – I didn't want it to look like theatre backdrops. But I **love** the relief quality of the textured surfaces. They create their own minute landscapes of hills and valleys, and the whole responds to the light in the same way the land does.

You will know how the light is different on your walls, from the summer to the winter, from the morning to the afternoon and evening, depending on where you live or work. This is the same with the textured panel pieces – they are difficult to photograph but they are ever-changing on the wall of a home.

My dress panels were at first monuments to different aspects of feminine life as I knew or understood it – puberty, flowering, marriage, motherhood, death/grief, majesty.

The **Summer dress** contains, bits of pine needle, and leaves and stalk – as well as modelling compound and vermiculite – which is ground mica, a product used in gardening to retain moisture in the soil. It is PH neutral – so it is a stable component of many of my

pieces. Because the textures pick up that changing light, the colour also changes a little, with the change of light from morning and throughout the day. It's not STATIC.

Over time, the land experience began insinuating itself into the fabric of the dress imagery, and it shifted the metaphors to include animals, trees, and landscapes:

Alternative Farming, predator/prey was based on my mother's 1940's lambskin coat, combined in contrast to the alligators that I saw in an alligator park when down in South Carolina. There I saw what appeared to be a bit of log sticking out of the pond but then, surprise! The log had eyes!

So, spoiler alert!!! this dress contained two 3-dimensional glass eyes, embedded in the knees of the skirt, that I hope will startle you!! It is one of my favourite of the panel dresses.

The large painting, ***Shamhat's Garden*** is the zenith of this integration of land, in a fantastical promenade of 5 dresses, in a secular Eden, that celebrates a joyful, fecund strength of the life cycle...

About the formal landscapes:

IN 2012 I went on an OCAD day-trip at Awenda Provincial Park, on Georgian Bay, a co-sponsored annual event where students go to paint and create for a full day in the park. The work is then shown at an annual exhibition on campus.

On that day, I had just settled down to work in a nice spot in the trees, when it began to pour rain. I covered myself in green garbage bags, and had an umbrella over my work as I painted. I had a **blast!** And have been a part of that university initiative ever since.

Because of that, I took some of a sabbatical in 2014 to go with artist and colleague Diane Pugen, up to the Algoma Region: to Sinclair Cove, Crowe River and Agawa Provincial park where Diane has worked for many years, making large sustained drawings for weeks upon weeks.

I wanted to know how to do that properly and **safely** – especially as a woman.

I learned over time how to slow down my “seeing” and work with the complex **rhythms** of nature - not just the **gestures and impressions** of it.

My favourite places are where Roots intertwine with Rocks. They are like figures to me.

Plein-air painting and drawing has become a very real part of my art practice now, although I don't actually consider myself a landscape painter. It's not that my landscapes are not serious work, they **are!** And it's dedicated work! But in the end, they really feed my experience of land which is then translated into what I really need to express as an artist. Which takes us to...

The Garden Dresses.

There are 2 sculptural dresses in my garden in Toronto. The first one is based on the **Summer dress** [here], which is part of my women's rights of passage series. I started longing to see it in the world dimensionally, and so I built it. Vines grew up it, and I had the idea of flowers coming down. The top of the strapless dress **here** [point] was constructed with a basket and coconut matting and sometimes holds a glass bowl on top, for water for the birds. Sometimes it's had seeds in it. This has been part of my garden now for some eight years, and it changes Every year. I tried growing corn and squash, but these didn't flourish. Beans of all different types are a great success! Sometimes it's well-groomed and sometimes it's not, depending on how much time I have to garden. I have seen it in all its seasonal aspects.

The other garden dress is more recent, based on The Great White Farthingale of Queen Elizabeth 1st, that is for me, an archetype of Majesty, now transformed into a metaphor for Empire. This dress in my real garden is made of copper piping, hockey netting and bamboo canes. My garden dresses need to be vital, so this one houses my compost pile, It takes the mishmash of what is "now", and uses the decaying structures to revision forward movement for better soil in the Garden [you can see it on the slideshow images on the board ...as a metaphor, this dress creation has helped me to reflect on the difficult subject of colonialism.

Elizabeth 1st saw herself as the "mother of the English people". She referred to her subjects as "My People"... and she held fast. She would not give that mothering up – not even to marry. She never saw herself as an Empress. Just the Queen of **her** England. The idea of empire was suggested to her at the end of her life, by an agent looking for favour, as a sort of "flattery" and corporate positioning, politically. The famous image of that great white farthingale was painted only shortly before her death.

I wanted to take the context of colonialism outside of the usual patriarchal paradigm, and examine it through the lens of a female Empire Dress

I began my reflection through **her** idea: as a Great Mother.

Through this lens, I have been thinking of the many types of “mother”, good ones, helicoptering ones, the “**only** mother knows best” ones. It’s a moving scale.

In the case of colonialism, the Indigenous peoples **did not ask for**, nor **need**, a new “mother”, thank-you-very-much-anyway.

I think of the forcefully imposed Empire Mother. This forced Foster-mother; intrusive, abusive and truly Narcissistic,

The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) documented the experiences of residential school survivors, their families, and communities. The troubling repercussions that keep surfacing in the news cannot be ignored and makes an uneasy backdrop to **any** deep encounter with the Land.

Because the land at the root of much of my creative impulse, **was** appropriated by settlers who ignored the treaties and rulings established of the Crown - at that time Queen Victoria - this is no joke for me.

In the 5 farthingale works exhibited here at The Gibson, you see me thinking my way through - trying to navigate my way through - the human cross-currents that cannot help but emerge in any land metaphor. I have not figured it out. I don’t have an “answer”. This is work still in progress.

Finally, to Shamhat’s Garden. It started more than 8 years ago when the single garden sculpture crossed paths with “**The Epic of Gilgamesh**”, the oldest surviving literary work composed nearly 4,000 years ago in ancient Mesopotamia. **Although** the story is about Gilgamesh and Enkidu, I became intrigued by **Shamhat**, the formidable priestess of the temple of ISHTAR, Goddess of LOVE and WAR.

Shamhat is selected by King Gilgamesh, to use her love arts to tame the wildman of Enkidu. I am fascinated by Shamhat as the civilizing principle of Enkidu, whom she meets in a deep forest, a paradise reminiscent of Eden, but one with no walls, no gates, no forbidden fruit. And a very different outcome.

In this modern, **robust** translation of the epic, by Stephen Mitchell* [and I can't recommend it highly enough!!] Shamhat has the power to adjust the balance of a kingdom. And she is a celebration of female agency.

And So: Shamhat's Garden is a painting about 5 dresses, through the journey of life, situated across a diurnal cycle and through the rolling of the seasons.

Shamhat's Garden was envisaged as an unfettered garden, **about and primarily for** the women in my life: about my sweet grandchildren, like sprites and sprouts in the orange light of Dawn in early spring. And they grow to adolescence in the midmorning, tangled, and green, and full of everything trying to find its place in the sun.

Then my daughters-in-law, striding with power and fullness, managing family and nurturing, and work; coming into rich full bloom, in the glorious blaze of the summer noon sun.

Then, about my peers and friends and "sisters", perhaps with change of focus in our work and lives as we are examining our skirts and assessing the needed repairs before beginning the rhythms of the bountiful harvest;

And finally, about the women I love, memories of my grandmothers, but of my aunts, and my mothers, who, during this time were moving with fierce pride as they navigated the inexorable keen-aired Winter in the Garden, in that silver clarity of a full moon.

In the 8 years of creating this piece, all of those women, sinewy with their life-energy concentrated right to its Winter essence, have since passed away. I hope that **I too** will be patient and prickly, tough at holding onto the things of importance... bare-boned tenacious in celebrating the resilient hope of life.

As I move into that awesome Winter in the moonlight, those beloved women are my true mentors and guardians for the journey.

BUT! Each Spring, in the garden dress at home the birds come and take the strands from the vines and coconut matting to build their nests... they are doing it **right now** as I speak. I've seen them this morning! It's the tale of Spring: new nests, new eggs, new life all over again, in that early morning, in that amazing, orange light of Dawn.

* Stephen Mitchell. Gilgamesh. Free Press, New York. 2004.