



**KAREN
DARLING**
figurative & abstract painter
sculptor

a winding road
by birgit moenke

How did you get involved in the arts?

I took the Illustration program at Sheridan College, but there's a difference between what I think a fine artist is, which I consider myself now, and my work as an illustrator. It was very much about being told what to do and not about a lot of creative freedom, so when the opportunity to open the restaurant came along (the original *Turtle Jack's* at 200 County Court Blvd. in Brampton – south of Steeles, east of Hwy 10), I opted to help my husband with the restaurant and take a complete break from art. So coming back into it, I came back as a fine artist. I think that's a completely different way of making art, because it's no longer for a client. It's strictly for you and it's very personal. So that happened in 2000. I've had two separate art lives: one as a commercial artist, a big break as a restaurateur and then now as a fine artist. I also started sculpture at that time, too, which I hadn't done before.

Have you always been interested in drawing from a young age?

Yes, since I was very young. That's all I can remember doing, and my parents were very supportive, although they weren't professional artists. My dad was a draftsman and an engineer, so at home he did pen and ink drawings and all kinds of things, so he was always very supportive of it. It was normal for me to think about going into art as a career, as long as it was commercial illustration, the graphic arts

or that sort of thing. I had no idea that you could possibly make a living at something like fine art.

Which course did you start with at Sheridan College in Brampton, and what did it evolve into?

Well, illustration covers everything, but it was definitely geared towards producing art for a client. I took interpretive illustration, which meant it could encompass book, advertising or editorial. For example, for an article on adoption, you would have to come up with an image for that article. The course covered everything from printmaking to photography to reproduction. I really appreciate that training, because one of the things they really pushed was Life Drawing. You had to be able to draw, and now it's like second nature. I can call on it when I need it, but ironically one of my biggest struggles is trying to get away from some of the more structured ways I used to do things, and just let things flow, because what I try to do now is perhaps more emotional rather than technical.

Did you find halfway or so through your course that you weren't going in the right direction?

No, the schooling was great, and I finished it. Then, when I came out of it, I started working, but it really wasn't what I was really thrilled about doing. So when I met my husband, who was in the restaurant business, we decided to open up a restaurant. It was a total switch, and concentrating on the business, I didn't do anything

artistic for about eight years before getting back into it. But the passion for art was always there. I think when I got back into it and worked with artists who were doing it for different reasons than I was used to, it opened up a whole new world of possibilities. It became very liberating just to be able to paint for myself— reach down deep inside and pull it out, as opposed to someone telling you what to do and how to do it.

Do you think that the restaurant gave you more security to go off on a tangent and express yourself more creatively?

Well, there is a freedom to not being financially tied to your art – definitely, and I don't know – I think it's one of the biggest struggles artists have: to keep true to themselves. If they have to put food on the table, then that is one of the most difficult things. Artists often turn to teaching. I feel very lucky, because the restaurant makes it possible for me to do this. But the restaurant business wasn't easy either, and it was a long road and a struggle to get here. I don't know how many artists can actually do art exclusively, depending on whether they're the sole bread winner of the family. Sometimes I think it's almost impossible.

I have to try to balance my home life with my life as an artist. I have a 10 & a 12 year old so I'm not able to just paint through the night when things are going well. Creativity isn't something I can just turn on & off whenever I feel like it, so as a wife & mother I have to try to come up with some kind of balance. This summer I decided to spend almost entirely with my kids and away from the studio because they're getting older so quickly, I didn't want to regret not spending this time with them.

While you were working in the restaurant industry, did images start coming to you that you wanted to paint, or did you feel a pull to get started again?

It wasn't a conscious thing at the time but I bartended a lot, and you talk to many different kinds of people. You see people who are happy, sad, down on their luck, or in a bar just to be around people because they're lonely. I think now when I'm painting people, I'm looking for an emotion – a true feeling. Everything trains your mind and your eye, even when you don't realize it. I'm very attracted to emotion in paintings, and it's not necessarily happy feelings. It's maybe something that's vulnerable, or something that is lonely.

When you got back into it, was that the first time you started going off into more abstract type work?

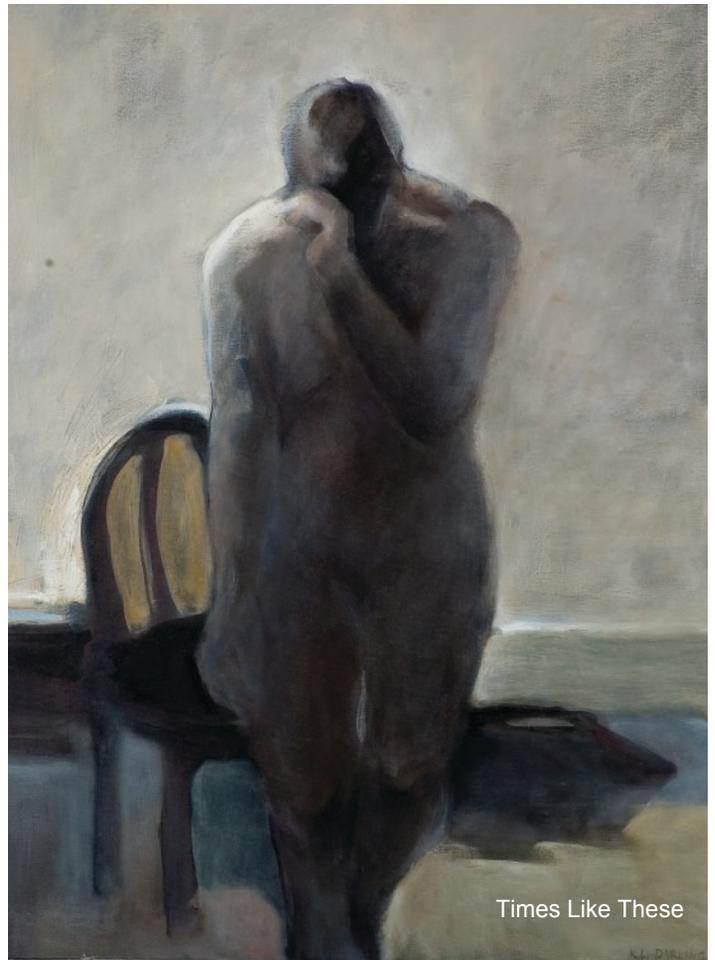
Yes it was. I think what I learned from school was a very structured way of doing things. An abstract painting can be completely the opposite. I needed to get into the abstraction to get away from the realism, because I was too caught up in it. I learned how to do things realistically and do it well, but doing things technically well doesn't necessarily equate with abstract painting – it's a totally different ball game. There isn't a technique everyone uses to paint abstractly. It's totally personal, whereas in illustration, you can do something technically well, but it may not have any emotion. So there's a difference, and I think painting abstractly forced me to switch over into that thinking, and I still love the human form, so now I think I'm sort of balancing both.

Did it surprise you that you were starting to feel differently and wanted to express yourself differently?

Yes, very much so, and I found that I needed to find people not only who brought it out in me but those who I could talk to and relate to. In a business world or in your home life, you may not talk to people who understand the need to create – or you may paint something they don't really understand, and so you might think you've gone down the wrong path. But when you talk to other artists, and they're going through the same things and have similar struggles, it sort of validates what you do. Luckily I belong to a group of Toronto artists – we draw & paint from a model every week. It takes a lot of stamina and self-motivation to pull everything out of yourself, so if you're around other people who get your creative juices going, then it certainly helps. The validation part is also important – having people in your life who understand what you're doing.

Do you feel you started to think differently once you started to want to express yourself in other ways?

Well, now I see things differently. We draw from a model every week, and before it was a technical process on seeing and then rendering what I was looking at. Now it's almost like, the subject is there, but the painting is coming from inside me. So when I look at the model, I take from it what I want, change it, add to it visually, I feel I really see things abstractly now, whereas I didn't before. Abstraction is not easy. It's not just slapping on paint and you've made an abstract painting. There's so much more. It can all fall apart so easily with an abstract painting.



Times Like These

Perhaps with a recognizable subject in the painting, it will always be something, whereas abstraction is more about form, balance, colour and line with nothing else to hang on except those things, so they have to be well thought out.

Do you feel you have to be a lot more accomplished as a painter in order to approach abstract painting? I think a lot of people believe abstract painting is really easy because there doesn't appear to be a technique, whereas it's quite the opposite.

Yes, I think that's true. I didn't think my abstract paintings were any good until I had been painting for some time. I was trying to put onto the canvas the image I had in my head, but it never worked out the way I had hoped. I had to start to react to the actual process. My paintings got better when I let them evolve naturally & reacted to what I had just painted rather than force it

Do you feel you're inspired by something that you don't understand?

Yes, I think when things are working well, I'm 'in the zone' & it just flows out of me. That's when it's hard to say 'Okay, now I have to go home and make dinner.' I may not be able to get back in the zone.

How do you know when you like it?

I talk to artists about this all the time, and I think this is a common struggle. You want to push yourself to go beyond your comfort zone, you want to get the most out of yourself that you can, but there is a point of going too far. There's also a point of not going far enough. You have to find that line that's just right, because sometimes I'll do a painting I'm quite pleased with, but then at the back of my mind I'm thinking – 'Did you really work it as much as you could? Did you really say something different? Did you really put all of yourself into it? And if that nags in the back of the artist's mind, then that's probably going to come across to a viewer if the painting is not there yet. Other times I've had a piece that has been working really well, and I pushed it beyond the point. Then it's a struggle to get it back. I think that's the quandary that all artists have.

Why do you think you do what you do?

I certainly am not doing it for the money or recognition because sometimes I get neither! I just feel I have to come into the studio & create even if nobody sees it. If I don't do it, I feel like I'm not really complete or utilizing a gift that I have or expressing the ideas I want to put forward.

Does the figurative painting come from a different part of your brain?

It's just a vehicle, really, for making paintings. I can do abstract paintings, and I enjoy them just as much as doing figurative, but there's something about the figure that gives me that extra oomph of emotion. Perhaps it's because we're all familiar with the figure, and we're all familiar with our own feelings. I think that I really like to play on that and maybe give the viewer a feeling. The figure to me is endlessly fascinating. You could paint any other subject, but it's not going to bring you to that same level of emotion.

When you see another painter's abstract art, are you able to read the emotions in it?

I think each viewer brings their own set of stuff to looking at it, so I may feel something that the painter wasn't, but isn't that the beauty of painting – that the viewer can see something or feel something of their own? That's why it's often difficult to put a title on an abstract painting, because inevitably you're making some kind of statement as to what it is or what the viewer should feel. I wouldn't want to ruin that experience for them or set up what I think they should be thinking.

Tell me about your sculpture. Where are you going with that?

For me it's very much about the looking – training my eye. I don't do it to sell it, and I don't do it to show it. Most of them are in various forms of being unfinished, but that's okay, because it was the 'doing it' that was the point, not the finishing it, putting it on a pedestal and displaying it. A lot of work goes into it strictly for the enjoyment of doing it.

Do you feel that once you have a really good grasp on getting something right that you have more liberty to break the rules?

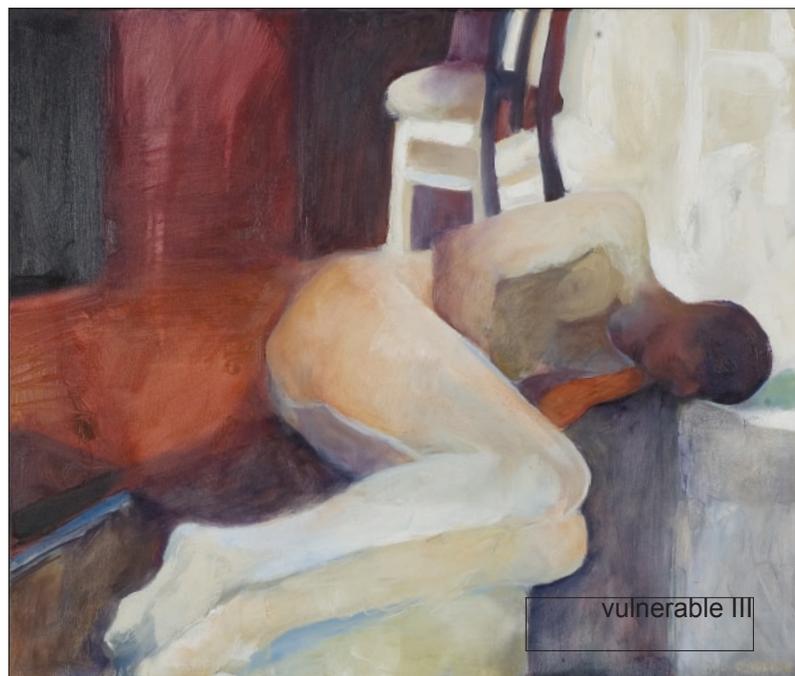
Possibly, but some artists have found their voice creatively without having to get it 'right' first.

Tell me about your association with the artists in Toronto?

The group has been getting together to draw & paint from the model for a number of years. There is an instructor, but he's there to facilitate you pushing yourself out of your comfort zone rather than teaching techniques.

Do you feel you've learned a lot taking that course?

I think my growth would have been much slower if I hadn't taken it. Seeing other artists push themselves forces you to



vulnerable III

see things in new ways. You have to open your mind to all different kinds of possibilities, whether you're viewing art or making it.

Where do you sell most of your work?

-At galleries in and around Toronto. I have a website also & sometimes directly from my studio.

Tell me about the studio tour that's coming up in Brampton.

It's a way of inviting in those people who might not otherwise see inside your studio & see your work. I think it's important for a community to have a diverse group of artists in it.

Do you feel there's a new energy in the air with The Rose Theatre in town?

Yes. I've lived here since college. I graduated in 1985, so that's quite a long time. We bought a house in downtown Brampton in 1992. The changes since then have been really something. The quality of the Rose Theatre brings everything up quite a few notches. It's really beautiful and it is bringing in high caliber performances. As far as the downtown business community goes, you need something like that to help the restaurants; help the little shops and everything else you love about the town survive. You can't just survive on the people who live in the downtown area. You have to have more people coming into town. The Rose Theatre will be just the thing to take Brampton to the next level.

What's the best advice you've ever been given?

As far as art is concerned one of the best pieces of advice is to take everything you've been taught, throw it on the floor, and then pick up only what you need. I think you always have to keep learning. I take classes all the time, but to only do what a teacher tells you isn't going to get you anywhere. You have to take parts that work for you and then turn it back out in your own way.

Do you do commission work?

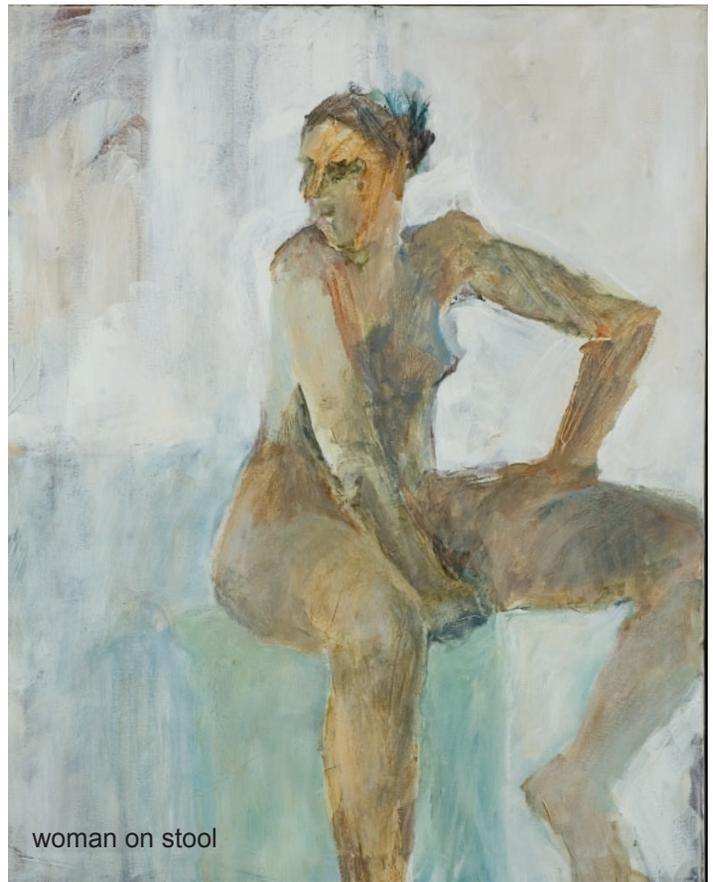
Not really. I have done commissions as far as sculpture is concerned – I have done busts of people, but commissioned artwork is illustration, and that's what I got out of doing.

What if somebody wanted you to do a work in certain colours?

I don't think I could do that. I think they'd have to see what I've done already. I don't know what the point would be of sitting in front of a blank canvas with the colours someone has in their couch. I don't know how I'd do that, because when I'm working, it's like what American painter Richard Diebenkorn said;

"I can never paint what I want; only what I would have wanted had I thought of it beforehand".

Even I don't know how the painting is going to turn out. I don't know if that [shade of] blue you want is going to be there when I'm done.



woman on stool

Do you feel you really have to be working in the moment when you're working?

Yes.

Is it all about moments?

Yes, but when you're working and things aren't going your way, is that a waste of time? Definitely not. I think that maybe that's the most fruitful time: realizing when it goes wrong and understanding how it went wrong. Sometimes you get too wrapped up in it, and then you just need to be away from it for a while & when you come back to it you can see things more clearly

What are your most important pieces and why?

Probably the ones that were huge struggles, the ones I forced myself to stay at and stick to. Whenever I look at them, I realize what came from sticking to them. It reminds me not to give up. Sometimes that's the beauty of a piece – that the layers of it are all coming through. A piece that comes easily may not have as much soul in it than the one you struggled with, so I think actually the pieces I have kept have been the ones I've struggled with the most.

What has painting taught you about life?

That the struggles are the most interesting parts.

Who are some of your favourite artists?

Well, Richard Diebenkorn, for one. He did a lot of abstract work, but also figurative. He was one of the San Francisco Bay Area artists as well as Nathan Oliveira. His marriage of abstract and figurative

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work, I think, is beautiful, and something I aspire to. His work seems just as fresh & new today.

How would you define success?

That's a good question. Society tells you that you're successful if you make a lot of money or you're famous, yet those aren't the reasons why I do what I do. So what is my barometer of success? I sit here and paint, and nobody knows what I do half the time, but I still feel successful, because I've challenged myself and maybe pushed myself to a level that I wasn't prepared to go to yesterday. To me, that's a success, and I don't think you get from Point A to Point B just by zooming along. I think that it's a whole winding road, and if you learn to live in the moment, you're a richer person and a better artist.

What's been your greatest life lesson?

Being true to yourself, and I think that's one of the biggest lessons as an artist, because I think it really is apparent when you're not true to yourself or doing things for the wrong reasons.

Did you take any more courses once you got into what you're doing now to help you get into the abstract form of painting?

Yes, quite a few. Once you get into the loop of artists – the ones who are on the same wavelength – they will recommend teachers they've worked with. Everyone doesn't work well with the same kind of teacher, because everyone is in a different place and has a different approach. I found that most of the people I liked and whose opinion I respected tended to like teachers that didn't teach something specific, but rather, guided you on your own path. They didn't try to instill their own ways of doing things, so the teachers I have enjoyed the most are those kinds of teachers.

What inspires you?

I guess I get inspired by colour and contrast, so that might be a jumping off point for me, because I get kind of excited about colour. It may come out in an abstract piece, and it may come out in my figurative work, but when I'm in front of a figure, I get very inspired by what's happening there: the lighting, the way the body is telling a story or a feeling. In that situation, it would be the figure that's inspiring me.

What do you like to do in Brampton?

I love to go skating in Gage Park in the winter and rollerblading in the summer. I recently bought a boat, so that's where I am most of the summer.

Where is your boat?

It's up on Lake Simcoe. We just moved it up outside of Orillia. It's kind of nice to live in a city and have all it gives you and also have the open water – sightlines that are long and far.

pg 66 **Have you painted differently since getting the boat, or have you painted anything you've been inspired by?**

Not necessarily, I think it's too new. In a city, there are lots of walls and buildings, and it's all about geometry. When the light comes, you see all of that stark contrast. When you're out on the water, it's more about subtlety, so maybe that will be a new sense that emerges.

Do you find yourself studying the light?

I do in different ways. When I'm at the marina and looking at it, I'm picking up on abstract compositions. Someone who is really interested in boats wouldn't like my photos or perhaps paintings that come of it, because it's not about the boat. It's about the light, line, shape and colour.

What do you know for sure?

I know that things are going to change, and I'll change as an artist and a person.

Who has had the biggest influence on your career?

I think the women I've met through this group that I've told you about, who paint together every week. I say women, because most of them are. Somewhere along the line an artist has to make money and support a family or come to it later when they don't necessarily have to do that. A lot of them probably had to give up on art at some point to have children and families – but the strength of these women and the intellect and vision just inspire me. I've met some amazing people, not just women, but I think for different reasons, the women have stood out. Artists are pretty interesting people, they often see things differently and I just look at them and see there's an interesting life after 50, 60, even after 80. Maybe it's the art that has kept their minds sharp.

It has shown me that being passionate about art & life never has to end.

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