

VISUALCHEMY – Judy Wapp Retrospective

Nelson Museum Archives and Gallery, March 22 to June 22, 2024

CURATORIAL ESSAY

The inclination of a curator is to place an artist's work within a larger context of art history. To find the currents and commonalities that echo the artist in question and draw a line of sorts, to show where the artwork fits within the vast canon of creative accomplishment.

Often the telling of that history can be full of egos and oversimplifications, patriarchy and Eurocentrism. It is this history that will irritatingly insist that Pablo Picasso is the king and creator of collage – even though Ann Ryan was an accomplished contemporary at the time; an artist like Hannah Hoch was a master of the medium much earlier, not to mention that there were examples of collage in Japan, arguably the birthplace of paper, as early as 1100, and other parts of the world. The medium of collage is universal and as old as paper itself, and examples can be found in the works of surrealists, abstract expressionists, pop artists, and myriad modern and historical practices.

But this is the art world that Judy walked away from in her wonderful comic strip memoir piece called 'Exiting the Art Scene' (New York City, 1965) a world of ego and influence and money, pretension and omission, a world that much of her work lambasts in a way that collage is uniquely suited – it turns mass media against itself and upends social convention and historical narratives in perfectly outrageous ways.

VisuALchemy is a retrospective and celebration of the artistic practice of an artist whose namesake Judy Garland walked away from the Emerald City just as Judy Wapp left New York City. But did she end up in the black and white homespun place after leaving the life of technicolor? This is where the stories diverge...

Judy has created a world where 1950s commercialized culture is conflated with earthy and jarring juxtapositions, where perception is a game and organized institutions and ideas are gutted and interrogated in every conceivable way. It is a fascinating vision that Judy gives of the world in which we all live – the product of an active and critical imagination, a quick wit, and astounding eye for composition. Judy's ability to balance and conflate wildly diverse subject matter into perfect accord is what makes her collages so appealing. They are just so cool.

In getting to know Judy's evolution as an artist, through her work, her family, and the numerous clippings that exists from regional press in the Archives, as well as living here in the early 1990s as an emerging artist myself, Judy always gave off star vibes (think leopard print sunglasses and a megawatt smile.) And yet, her attitude has always felt grassroots and generous, more about life as art than art as a commodity, and a theatrical and playful pragmatism about the path she has chosen to follow.

“I always felt that art belongs in public spaces, like laundromats, cafés, and alley walls, where people, like me, can pause and look at it as they go about their daily lives.”

And this is where the neck ties on power poles come in, and the quietly dedicated philanthropy in the community that both Judy and her partner David Everest are known for, and the decades long arts practice and rural lifestyle. Artists create the culture that in turn supports and reflects them, and I think that this is true of the Wapp family in general, and Judy specifically. There is a sense of nostalgia that is lurking around the corners of this retrospective, a feeling that the wonderfully aberrated underbelly of the Kootenay culture of yore that Judy so exemplifies is somehow being lost or forgotten or gentrified out of existence – which of course is the privileged purview of transplants the world over – and yet somehow it feels real in this moment. We need to revel in our roots and acknowledge the artists amongst us. We live in a much more interesting, authentic, and colourful place because of them!

Arin Fay, Curator