

2007

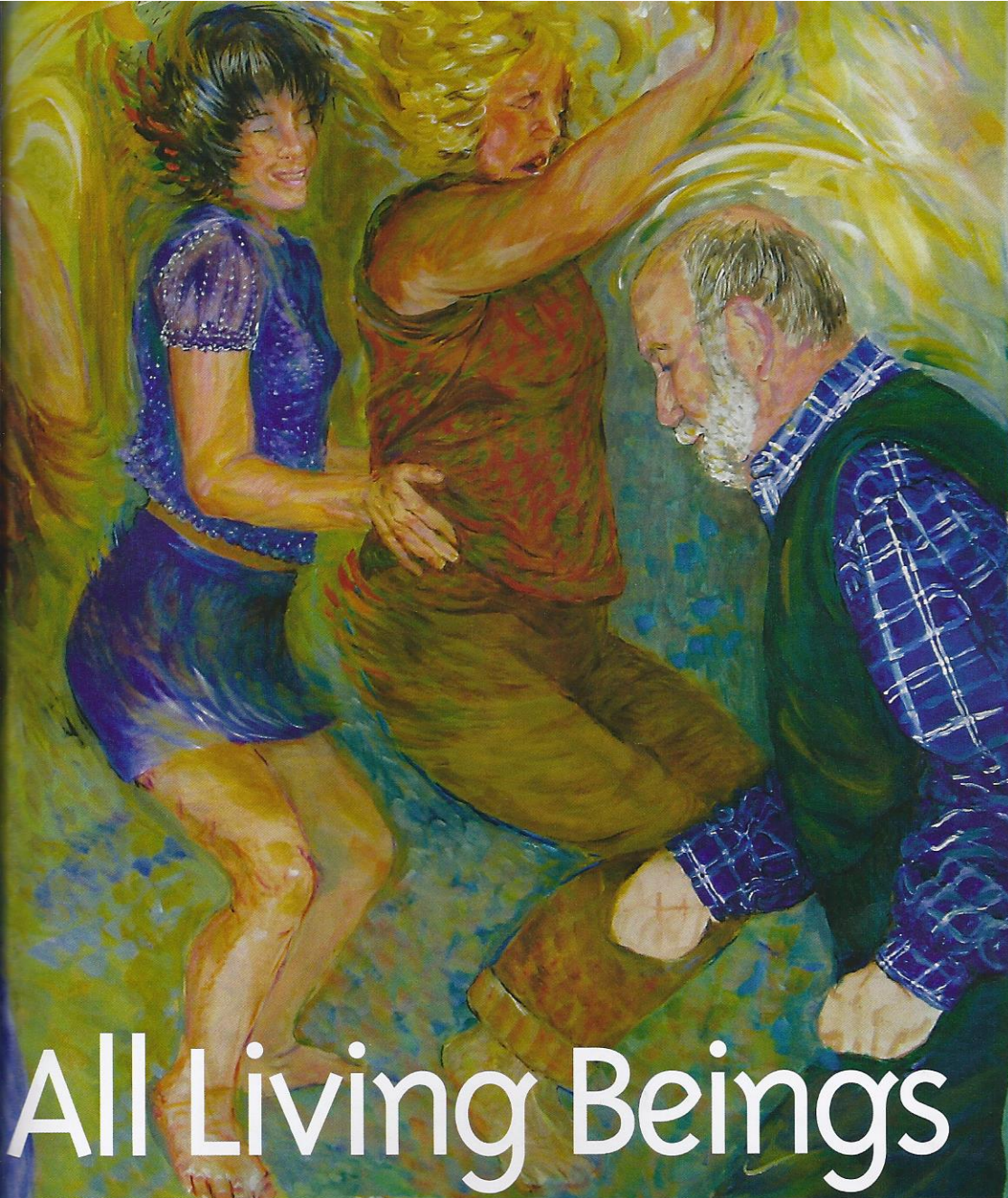


PHOTO BY JAN DEGRASS

All Living Beings

Wildlife artist Gloria Massé lives the simple life on Gambier Island

Gambier Island artist Gloria Massé paints bears and wolves, and occasionally, people. They are all one to her — all living beings. Perhaps that's why the bears have personality written on their furry faces, and the wolves are sometimes seen posing in most non-carnivorous behaviours, skulking outside a kitchen drooling over a pie cooling on a window sill. However, they are not cartoon characters. They display all the complexity of wild creatures — their motivations exposed in Massé's realistic portraits.

Lately, the artist has embarked on a new subject: people dancing. She was inspired by watching a Gambier crowd break into movement after hearing singer Bobby Bruce, also known as Nearly Neil, a Gambier resident who performs classic Neil Diamond tunes at local events.

"He made me feel that I wanted to paint the spirit of Gambier," she said, and she turned on a tape of Bruce's music while working. The dancers in Massé's painting, *When Bobby Sings*, are vibrant with a kind of primitive energy. It's the type of painting that will be more meaningful to locals than to the galleries of Gibsons or of Whistler where she sells much of her work.

Last year, she painted two spirit bears, two-and-a-half-metre tall fibreglass sculptures which were displayed in Vancouver and Whistler, then auctioned to raise funds for the Lions Society Easter Seal charity. Just getting the big white bruins onto Gambier was a task in itself, requiring the help of many neighbours to transport the bears from the ferry dock through the woods to her studio. Using vivid colours, she painted the connection between salmon and bear on to the sculpture—the bear eats the salmon and leaves the remains in the woods where it fertilizes the trees, thus improving the salmon habitat. The salmon cycle bear raised \$32,000 at auction. Massé painted the second sculpture in simple bear brown, realistically, though on its upraised paw it held the Great Bear Constellation, Ursa Major. The bear was named Jeanie after a well-known Whistler bear, and it sold for a whopping \$50,000 — funds that go to charity, not to the artist.

Massé lives very simply on Gambier in a small cabin with a separate studio. She is a professional who works at her art full time.

“She’s the quintessential starving artist,” says Morley Baker of Westwind Gallery in Gibsons who handles her work on the Coast. There are no lavish ocean vistas from her home, no fancy fixtures in her tiny studio. Instead, the studio started life as a humble shed that her partner, John Calder, dismantled at her former Vancouver home, after numbering all the parts, then reassembled on Gambier when she moved there in 1989. It has since had some length added to it, along with skylights and windows for ventilation, but it could best be described as rustic. She keeps the decor simple, allowing space for her cats to snooze and her young grandsons to join her in making art. Nonetheless, her woodland setting is inspiring. Occasionally, a painting will be born of the minutiae of her environment: the pattern of scattered leaves on the trail, the tall grasses that could open at any minute to reveal another creature.

“But there are no bears or wolves on Gambier,” she laughs. Her fascination with wolves dates back to when she was volunteering at the Vancouver Children’s Festival and she heard a native storyteller, Leonard George, describe how his grandfather had roamed the streets of Kitsilano accompanied by two grey wolves. She was intrigued and the wolves lived in her imagination until she could put them on canvas.

“I’ve painted fish, marmots, coyotes, and I’d like to paint other endangered animals. I want to try and help a little bit — to reach people’s hearts through art.”

Nor are there any orangutans on Gambier but they also became the subject of an early series. After hearing about a Simon Fraser University professor, Birute Galdikas, who studied orangutans in the wilds of Borneo, Massé was gripped by a new creative surge and she began to paint the huge apes. After going to the Seattle Zoo, she met Galdikas in person who even visited her on Gambier to offer her help. Though Massé has received many favourable reviews in her career, she is most delighted with the critical pronouncement on the orangutan paintings from Galdikas’s son, who grew up living among the primates. “He told me that I had painted the lips exactly right,” she says proudly.

Though the diminutive Massé is only five feet tall, her paintings are large. Her role in the Island community is also large. She has led art classes encouraging others to paint. Resident Margaret Gabriel says that it was Massé who gave her the impetus to start.

“I took up painting at age 65,” she says. “Now it’s a joy of my life.”



PHOTOS SUBMITTED



Preceding page: Artist Gloria Massé stands beside one of her recent works, *When Bobby Sings*. Above: Bear in Northern Lights. Left: Helpers carry the unpainted Jeanie to Massé’s studio upon arrival to Gambier Island.



Below: The painted Jeanie on display prior to receiving a \$50,000 bid at auction.

Massé has also drawn a map of the Island to be sold as a fundraiser, she has played a part in the establishment of possibly the world's tiniest gallery, a three-metre by three-metre building next to the general store on Gambier that sells local art and crafts, and, last year, she and fellow resident Joley Switzer produced a calendar of Gambier's real men who posed in the nude to raise funds for emergency medical equipment for the Island.

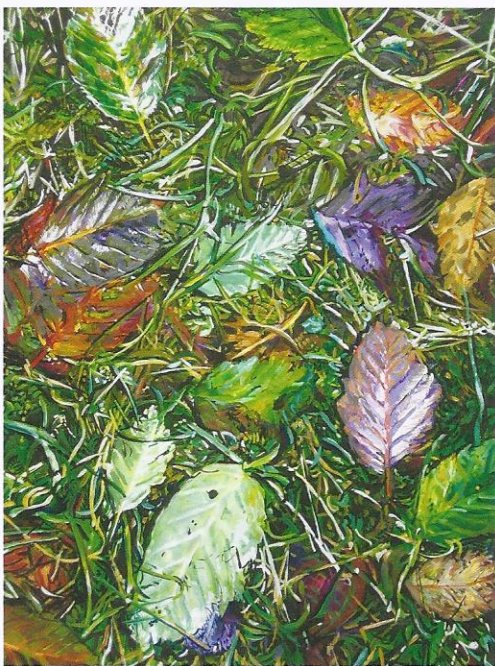
Her next project is a return to creatures — she'll be painting a seven-foot bald eagle, again for the Lions Society. She's looking forward to it, but there's no word as to whether her helpful sculpture-toting neighbours feel the same way. **CL**



Left: This warm brown bear is called Beauty of the Forest.

Below: Born of Massé's environment — the pattern of scattered leaves on the trail titled, A Piece of Land in Early Autumn.

60"x40"



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