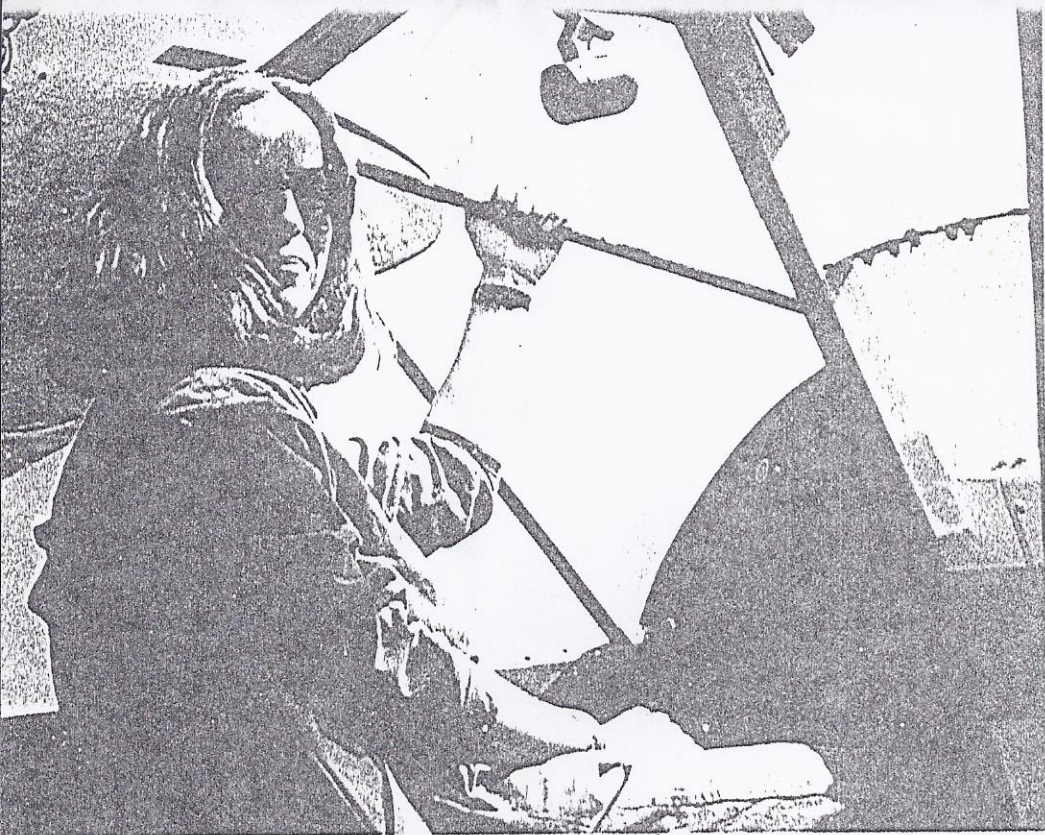


1995



Judith Currelly

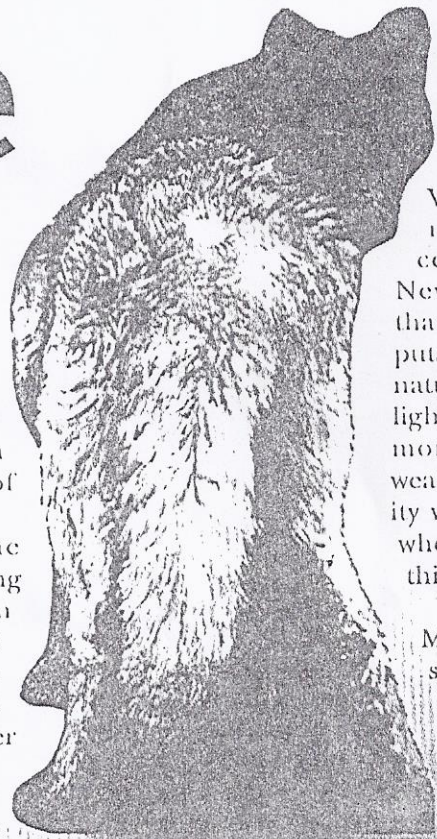
To support her art practice, Judith Currelly worked as a bush pilot in Atlin, BC. Below: Gloria Massé's *Wolf Looking Back* (1995), acrylic on Sierra pine.

in her 3.5 by 6 metre cabin on Gambier turned out to be more of a challenge than Massé realized. For two years, she found herself coping with no heat or running water. As well, chopping wood and maintaining her simplified living arrangements were taking time away from her painting. Recently, Massé acquired electricity and a water hook-up (she still uses an outhouse, though), and now has more time to devote to her work.

Massé does not discount that these living arrangements have their difficulties. But she has a distinct advantage: given her minimal living expenses, her painting almost totally supports her, a situation almost no artist living and working in Vancouver or any other large urban centre experiences.

Massé, who graduated from the University of Victoria in 1979 and has exhibited in Toronto and Vancouver, often misses much of what urban centres have to offer. Nevertheless, she finds that the noise of the city puts her out of touch with nature. "On Gambier, the light is not obscured. I feel more in touch with the weather and a greater affinity with my surroundings, where I can watch living things."

In the last few years, Massé has pursued a series of paintings of wolves inspired by Lois Grisler's writings about living with wolves in the Arctic tundra. Unlike Robert



VISUAL ARTS

Natural exposure

Two artists face unique challenges living in rural BC communities

by Denise Panchsyn

To be a successful artist in BC, all roads lead to Vancouver, right?

Not necessarily. Throughout BC, there are members of the arts community who have chosen to live and work outside the Vancouver mainstream. Gloria Massé and Judith Currelly are two such artists who live in rural areas that offer unique chal-

lenges, as well as advantages. For both painters, connecting with nature and experiencing the wild first-hand is a crucial aspect of their work.

To escape the high cost of living in Vancouver in the '80s, Massé moved to a cabin with an adjacent studio on Gambier Island on the Sunshine Coast. However, living

Bateman's and other wildlife artists' precise, static rendering of nature, Massé's paint-handling is fluid and visceral. In her watercolours, Massé integrates the natural plants of her surroundings with elusive images of wolves, which capture both the wolf's mystery and the vital, yet strange and enigmatic, power of the wild.

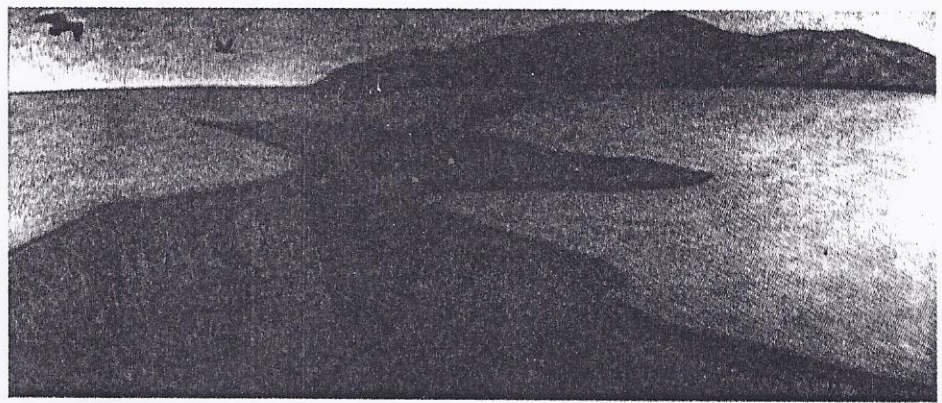
Recently, Massé had the opportunity to spend time at the Dalhousie Animal Behaviour Field Station in Shubencadie, Nova Scotia, observing timber wolves raised in a natural

Chopping wood and maintaining her simplified living arrangements were taking time away from Massé's painting.

environment. Her latest group of paintings, now on display at Vancouver's Diane Farris Gallery, illustrates how directly experiencing the sight, sound and touch of wolves has influenced her work.

Massé describes these paintings as "a celebration of the curiosity, intelligence and beauty of this animal." Eye contact with them provided the most lasting impression for Massé. By isolating the image of this animal, she hopes "the viewer will become aware of both observing the wolf, and in turn, being observed."

While Massé is still relatively close to Vancouver, her friend, Judith Currelly, spent over ten years living and painting in the extreme north of BC. In her paintings, Currelly seeks to explore "the relationship between human beings and the vast northern landscape." Part of her reason for living in the north, says the artist, is that "I need to experience what I paint."



Judith Currelly's *Earth Secrets* (1995), oil on wood.


Currelly has indeed experienced the northern wilderness not only as a painter living in Atlin, BC, but also by supporting herself as a bush pilot, an occupation that heightened her awareness of the vast northern tundra. Her large-scale, evocative paintings of the north speak intimately of a deep knowledge of the Arctic and of a sense of place. "My painting," she comments, "does not have a strong intellectual basis, but grows out of life experience and a deep connection with my surroundings."

The painter studied at the Ontario College of Art in the '70s, and was in the thick of the Toronto art scene. Having summered twice at Atlin, which she describes as having "a thriving arts community," she moved there in 1980. While she experienced a sense of isolation at times, "living there," she explains, "allowed me to develop what I needed to do rather than what is expected of artists in Toronto."

Although she recently moved to Victoria so that her daughter may attend school, Currelly still spends four months of the year in the north.

For her, the north remains "a totally magical place with a tremendous history and a tremendous power as well as fragility."

Her recent paintings continue her exploration of the Arctic landscape. Herds of caribou surge across a vast open landscape in *Phantom Herd* (1993). Their fragile forms are rendered with sinuous lines amidst thinly painted layers of rich earthy tones. There is a sense of the moment, as well as the past – the ancient peoples and herds that lived and passed through the land. In this way, Currelly's paintings combine a deep respect and wonder for living form with a brooding sense of the infinite.

Both Currelly and Massé acknowledge they sometimes miss what the city has to offer. For instance, they don't have the opportunity to see and discuss work by other artists as often as they would like. But perhaps the advantage is really ours. Their work is filled with a personal sensibility and commitment too rarely found in the current artistic climate. 



Friends Currelly and Massé.

DENISE PANCHYSYN was director-curator of the Prince George Art Gallery (1990-91), and now teaches art history at Langara College and Simon Fraser University.