

Sacred animals speak in paintings

JAN DEGRASS
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT WRITER

Gambier Island artist Gloria Massé is not afraid of sacred cows.

The animals of myth: the cows and water buffalo of India, the bear, the wolf, are the major subjects of her paintings. Yet she would not call herself a wildlife artist — most of the images that she paints come from within. They are rarely drawn from nature but from her imagination, from something within her that connects with the creatures.

A retrospective show of her intense and vividly colourful paintings will be on display at the Westwind Gallery in Gibsons starting Oct. 16 for two weeks.

Massé's journey has been a fascinating one: starting with a career as a children's librarian, visiting India as a novice artist, showing her life-sized cows and buffaloes at an Emily Carr exhibition and studying for her B.F.A. at the University of British Columbia, then more visits to India, until her first professional connection with the Diane Farris Gallery in Vancouver. She painted grasses at that time — huge, vivid displays of long grasses and lupins in which a viewer could wander and become lost.

Then the wolves began.

"The wolves came from loving my own dog," she says.

One day while volunteering at the Children's Festival, 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; integrating these wild creatures into her environment became a theme in many later works. After seeing her wolf paintings, a photographer and animal psychologist suggested she visit a natural wolf reserve in Nova Scotia to interact with them first-hand.

The wolf paintings sold well, allowing her to raise the money for a rural half-acre on Gambier Island. In 1989, she moved to the 12' by 20' cabin that had no running water or electricity.

"There was not a lot of traffic on Gambier," she recalls. "There was green all around me."

She loved it. She moved a cedar shed, piece by piece, from the city that later became her art studio in which she would play tapes of howling wolves to inspire her work. In one series, she depicted the wolves staring hungrily through the lace curtained kitchen windows eyeing up a cooling apple pie and a plate of butter tarts. Where did the food imagery come from?

"That's the influence of Gambier Island," she laughs, a community that has become a mecca for good bakers.

The wolves also drew the attention of the Chateau Whistler Gallery (now closed) and soon she was showing her work regularly in the Whistler area,



JAN DEGRASS PHOTO

Gambier Island artist Gloria Massé with her work *Blind Rider No. 1* that will be on display with others of her surreal animal paintings at the Westwind Gallery in Gibsons starting Oct. 16.

these days at Function Junction.

Enter the orangutans.

One day, she stopped painting to listen to a science program about a Simon Fraser University professor

Though Massé has received many favourable reviews in her career, she is most delighted with the critical pronouncement on the orangutan paintings from Birute Galdikas's son, who grew up living among the primates.

"He told me that I had painted the lips exactly right," she says proudly.

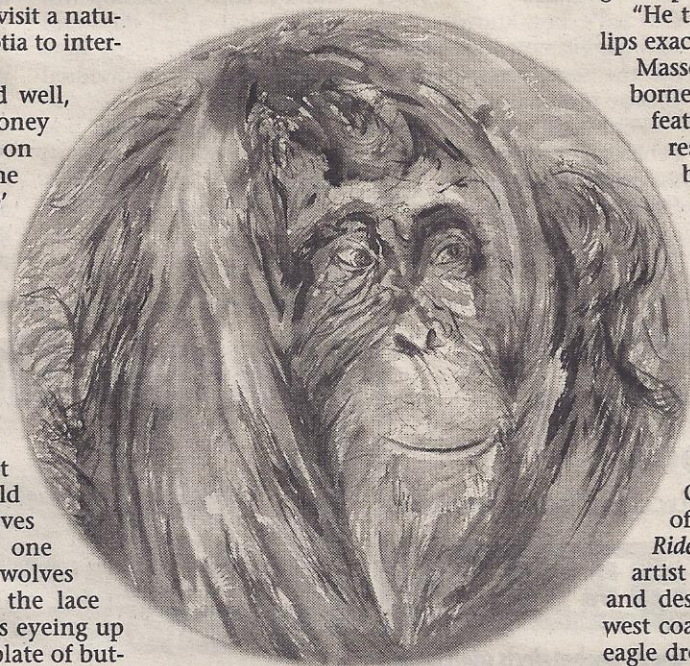
Massé's latest series of paintings is borne of her time in Whistler. They feature those bears that Whistler residents have come to recognize by names such as Katie, Jeannie and Slim.

"The bear is also a sacred animal," she says. "These days, people are moving closer to the bears' environment, seeing them more."

The impetus for this forthcoming show came from friend and fellow Gambier resident Morley Baker, owner of the Westwind Gallery. He's keen to show one of Massé's larger works, *Blind Rider No. 1*, that the late, eminent artist Jack Shadbolt once viewed and described as a good example of west coast surrealism. In it, a sightless eagle dressed in a black jacket and silver shoes steps from a red, luxury car carrying a plate of eggs. Bizarre, but imaginative.

"Don't ask me where that comes from," says Massé candidly.

The Westwind Gallery launch reception for Massé's work is on Saturday, Oct. 16, from 4 to 7 p.m. at 292 Gower Point Road. All are invited.



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 taking a trip to Seattle to see them in the zoo, she met Galdikas in person. She offered her help by sending detailed slides for use in her work.