

Interview with Paulette Turcotte

In the feminine mode of knowing, women are giving shape to things, speaking of things invisible. Sometimes borderland dwellers, we move back and forth between worlds, and time, speaking of the existence of another stratum, the secret enclosure where unfolding life is protected, dreamlike worlds where we live and speak another language, prophesy, tend life's mysteries. (From an introduction to readings from *The Book of Marecha*)

in the hot sun we have already come back to life, have thrown off the darkness, have interpreted our passage, have participated in its verbiage. (From the poem *A Women Between Worlds*)

Introduction

Four years ago, Paulette Turcotte left her home, her farm studio, her 25-year marriage and her three adult children to paint and write full time, in the city. She was 41. She was frowned upon, scorned by friends and her children refused contact with her.

Not an auspicious beginning to a new phase of an artistic career that was coincidentally, perhaps, 13 years old at the time. Nevertheless, the woman and the career survived. Time works its healing. Husbands remarry, friends accept or move into memory.

Ms. Turcotte spent last Christmas with her children, a new beginning of another sort.

Paulette Turcotte was born in 1942 into a working class family of French/Irish descent in Peterborough, Ontario. She was married when she was 16 and her three children were born by the time she was 20.

Her career as an artist began in 1970 and her work sold quickly. After 1975, she worked from her farm-studio near Eganville, Ontario, and was discovered by arts patron Jack

von Mettenhein of Seattle, Washington, who purchased more than 200 of her works.

In 1983, Ms. Turcotte moved to Ottawa where she exhibited in numerous group shows and three solo exhibitions. She has produced several book covers and her work has appeared in a range of periodicals. *The Book of Marecha* was published by Split Quotations, and she recently received a Canada Council grant to work on a book of short stories.

In 1986, she researched and helped execute an arts project—the Disappeared in Latin America—dedicated to Alaide Foppa, a feminist exiled in Mexico who disappeared in Guatemala in 1981. She has also sponsored fund-raising sales and exhibits in aid of Latin American relief.

She tends to portray the neglected or forgotten in her paintings, using her own features freely, whether in the Prostitute or the Communicant.

Her paintings mix the real and the unreal, isolating a moment, a human being, fixed forever in compassionate eulogy.

This summer, painter-poet Turcotte took time to reflect on where she's been and where she's going. The conversation took place in her studio near Ottawa. The occasion was the celebration of her 45th birthday.

QUESTION: When did art become dominant in your life?

TURCOTTE: I've been painting seriously since 1970, and I've considered myself an artist since that time. That's when I knew I had to paint. It was becoming apparent that it was part of my being and I had to do it. As a child I did a lot of drawings, but I think all kids draw. Later I painted, but not consistently. In 1970, I finally realized it is what I was born to do. I painted every day for a year, right after the children left for school...took night courses and weekend



workshops, studied with other artists. I cooled it off just a little bit after that, but I always painted. I've gone through periods of not painting and the result is guilt and pain.

QUESTION: Does the pain and guilt go away when you are working?

TURCOTTE: I paint a picture, and while I'm doing it I know I am giving birth to something great. But when I'm finished I know I have to do another one. It's never ending. When I'm painting it's like being in a trance. I'm not aware of anything else. I'm not aware of time passing. In the beginning stages of a painting it's like that. It's flowing freely and I'm just locked into it, as if I'm in a box with the painting and just experiencing it.

QUESTION: You mentioned drawing when you were a child. Were there early indications of an interest in writing as well?

TURCOTTE: When I was a child parents didn't teach their children to write at three or four years old the way they do now. But I played with the idea of writing and loved it. When I was five I filled a scribbler with loops and lines and thought I had written a book. When I was a teenager I was very interested in poetry. I'd read poetry books in bed and take them on camping trips. Just before I got married, when I was 16, I was really excited about English classes and wrote all kinds of stories. That was the year I quit school and then I was writing stories while I was having babies. A couple of years after that I began writing poetry.

QUESTION: Your earlier work, both painting and poetry, was, outwardly anyway, more structured. Your private life has also undergone a change away from structure and tradition. Was there a common thread of influence in these things?

TURCOTTE: There may have been. I never looked for one, so I don't really know. I haven't had a great deal of formal education in the arts, or in general for that matter. I learned totally by doing for so many years. My poetry rhymed in the beginning. At some point, I realized it didn't have to rhyme.

I stopped painting baskets of fruit and people as photographic images because I didn't feel good in the constraint. People were buying my paintings, but the work seemed empty. So once in awhile I'd paint something that was really expressionistic or bold...then, often, I destroyed

or painted over it. The odd time I would put one in a gallery. Then they started selling.

QUESTIONS: Where do the paintings come from?

TURCOTTE: A painting can exist in the unconscious for years before it is expressed, will often emerge as an emotion, a sense of reaching towards something before it materializes on canvas. The Carousel paintings were a part of my psyche in a way that could only come from my childhood, but not necessarily the experienced. Perhaps something that was missing. The other thing that occurs to me is the total carnival atmosphere as an area of the psyche that I can relate to. I know that I'm not finished with it. It comes out in my poetry and short stories as well.

QUESTION: Are there things you do to encourage the coming out?

TURCOTTE: I usually begin by letting the paint flow freely, playing with it until I get a sense of an image. A face might appear. Sometimes I turn it totally upside down, and all of a sudden it's there and I go ahead with it...evening up some lines, changing some things, applying technique.

QUESTION: Looking at your work, one has to wonder why all the faces that appear are such unhappy faces.

TURCOTTE: I don't think that all the faces are sad. I do feel that life is harsh, that there is also a terrible humour. It is tragically serious and at the same time a cosmic joke. The Communicant paintings (there are three) tend to reveal the mystery as well as the mystic and pathos of Catholicism. I was that "sweet little girl in the white veil" I was actually an intense person trying to dig into the bones of God.

QUESTION: Has religion, and Catholicism in particular, had a major influence on your art?

TURCOTTE: Everything has influenced me. The church gave me a sense of mystery, a connectedness with the spiritual world, the unseen, and so the unconscious. The dramatic rituals appeal to my artistic nature.

QUESTION: Do you consider yourself political?

TURCOTTE: My work is woman's work. It is born of me but there is also a sense that it belongs to women, in the living out of my life, my interpretation of it. The work is Canadian, has to be, is pulled out from the lived life. I feel

my work has to be free of labels. It speaks for itself. I don't think it preaches, but rather, states. It isolates individuals, gives space to the overlooked—gives them status, so to speak.

My father worked in a factory. Life seemed an endless struggle. My mother had numerous breakdowns. It was difficult to see at the time, but we seemed to have been allotted our place, our role. Consciousness of that was a breakthrough. I was aware then that I wasn't just fighting to go forward but had to contend with years of conditioning that said "you can't go anywhere."

QUESTION: You had to distance yourself from some people to continue your art?

TURCOTTE: I knew where my real truth was; if they couldn't be in agreement with it then I couldn't be with them.

QUESTION: How does a traditional marriage impinge on an artist who is also a wife and a mother?

TURCOTTE: I think I was never very traditional. I think I always fought everything. I did traditional things. But I was needing life experience to go on. I couldn't stay secluded in that little place any longer. My family wanted me to be home making their lives secure and normal, at the wood stove pushing out cookies I suppose. But I needed to be free of being a mother, endless mother, endless giving. I'd missed my teen years. I had to experience what life was like, to prove that I could survive, alone. So I went, feeling totally alone. When I left my farm I guess I gave up everything I worked for over 25 years. My husband hated me. My children hated me. A lot of friends simply disapproved. So I went, a woman married at 16, looked after in a way. I didn't even know how to get on a bus or call a taxi. But I went because I had to go. And I don't feel bad, because it had to be. I've bet my life on my talent. I believe this is what I'm here for. I have doubts. I don't make a lot of money and I don't get a lot of feedback. But I don't quit, because I believe.

