

Pictographs: Painted Drawings

My Experience as Artist-in-Residence

Rowesa Gordon



In 2006, I was invited to assist Margo Fuchs Knill with ITS 3, the graduating class in the masters program, and to be artist-in-residence during that session at the European Graduate School. Although I was honoured by this invitation, I usually paint alone in my studio. Showing my work-in-progress in a community that I hold in such deep esteem made my particular anxieties come up, and I struggled with the inclination to decline the offer. I could hear the voices

of both my demons and my guardian angels setting up a yes/no ruckus. Joni Mitchell said, "Chase away the demons, and they will take the angels with them." I decided to keep them both close, knowing that letting go of this opportunity to show my work in a creative community of supportive students, colleagues and mentors, would be sheer folly. I said yes, thank you so much for this generous offer, and began to finish and gather the images I wanted to take with me.

I've always called myself an artist and have been keeping drawing journals for over 50 years. When I'm ready to begin a painting process, I choose a number of these drawings as a place to begin, and work with them in a series. I refer to them as painted drawings, paintings from my drawings, using a technique I learned as an animator back in the day when 24 frames per second were still painted on clear acetate cels.

I arrived in Saas-Fee with fifteen 8" x 10" paintings, small enough to travel safely in my suitcase. That session, we had available space for an atelier, and with encouragement from Margo and help to cover the walls with protective plastic, I set up paper, paints and brushes so that I had a space to pursue my own artistic exploration while students and faculty were invited to do the same. Painting is most often a solitary pursuit, as it is for me in my own studio, and participating in this shared studio space was invigorating to my creative spirit— a resource of time, space and materials with folks dropping in, staying to make art or finding a corner to sit, relax and watch the show; painted images inside, mountains in the distance. These were moments of grace where everything I needed I had with me; they were comforting, helped me stay flexible and kept my work exciting. Although the uncertainties around sharing my work still surfaced, this studio time and the company of others helped turn my fears into what Paolo Knill has referred to as “creative anxiety” – meeting the fear of making art by making art.

As part of my ongoing practice, I often begin each morning with a drawing, black marker on white paper. I continued this practice over the summer session, and these drawings, all the same size, became the part of my show I titled: “Morning Drawings: Waking Up In Saas-Fee.”

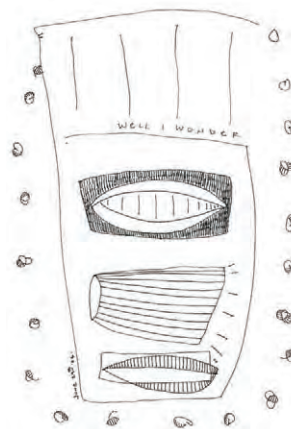
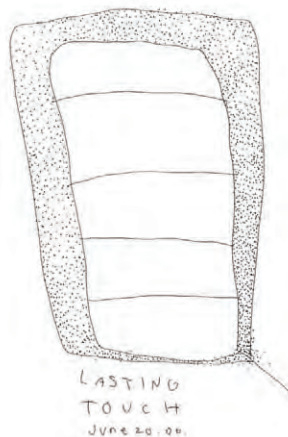
Meanwhile, ITS 3 students were getting ready for exams and thesis defenses. Margo started the first core group with her Swiss Tarot cards. We all chose one and used that as a stepping-off point for conjuring, mobilizing resources and calling up wishes. In a dialogue about the thesis as a work of art, Margo talked about *praxis*, action in the world and go-

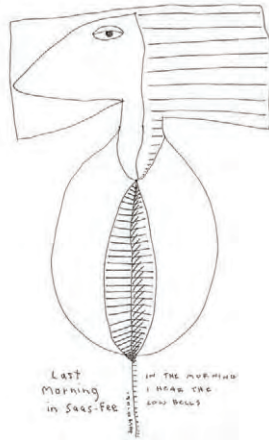
ing public. I was aware of a parallel process between myself and the ITS 3 group: students preparing to give over their work to the thesis table and me, with my bundle of paintings and drawings, getting ready for my show—all of us going public.

I called my show, “Pictographs: Painted Drawings,” and the poster announced two special guests, Paolo Knill & Elizabeth McKim, two of my earliest mentors, both dear to my heart. A couple of troupers, used to taking the stage together, they offered to respond with aesthetic feedback. I most often title my drawings, and on the afternoon of my show Elizabeth and I sat together over an apricot tart, perusing my art as she gathered up all the titles, already shifting and moving the words around, allowing them to find their own voice.

For my artist’s talk, I shared in part the journey of my art-making, including many years of creating a world for children with fabric design, murals, book illustrations, stickers and paintings, then going into therapy so that I could understand more clearly what I was excavating from this imaginal world and in my drawing journals, and from there, finding my way into training as an expressive arts therapist. As I was finishing the talk, I referred back to a conversation the previous night with Naomi, my partner, when I outlined what was to her my familiar concerns of disappointing, being seen, and essentially, not a good enough artist. Her reply carried me gracefully through the evening: “Rowesa you are not a good artist or a bad artist—you are an artist.”

I remember easily my joy, the undiluted pleasure of receiving the gift of such tender





and joyful feedback – Paolo on piano, Elizabeth riffing on the poetry in my drawings, together singing my paintings, transforming the gathered titles, feelings, thoughts and images from the evening into poetic song.

I've learned from Paolo that art is not self-expression; art is a work that takes us somewhere we have not yet been and, in that way, will surprise us. I've learned from Elizabeth that our

lived experience is the language of our art-making and that to complete the circle of healing we need to publish, that is, to be public with our art. I did publish that evening, went somewhere I'd not yet been. And I was surprised.

When I can, I like to keep in mind Rilke's words: "Trust in what is difficult." The day after the show, I wrote in my journal how glad I was to have arrived with my paintings to share.



Rowesa Gordon, Co-Director and core teaching faculty at the CREATE Institute is an expressive arts psychotherapist in private practice who also supervises and consults in this field. A graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design, with a masters degree in expressive therapies from Lesley University, she has a certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies (CAGS) from the European

Graduate School. Her paintings have appeared in professional journals and have been shown in Canada, Europe and the United States.