

From a young age, uman-sures was immersed in art. Born in Winnipeg, she lived with her parents in New York until the age of four, where her mother was a practicing artist and her father an illustrator. A childhood test indicated a strong artistic bent, nurtured by her mother's own love of French culture, the ballet and foreign films. After several years, the family relocated to Winnipeg so that her mother could teach. deborah completed a degree in fine arts at the University of Manitoba, where she focused on drawing, painting and printmaking, followed by a course in fashion illustration run by the head illustrator for Eaton's at the time. uman-sures' mother, who had herself spent time working as a fashion illustrator, would show her daughter the famous full-page newspaper advertisements for Lord and Taylor by American Dorothy Hood, whose distinctive hand-scrawled style was much admired at the time. From this early start with illustration, uman-sures would go on to carve a wide-ranging career involving graphic design, art direction and teaching together with her own artistic practice.

As evidenced by the exhibition title *A Fine Line*, her work is centered very much on drawing, with a classical, illustrative quality and plenty of blank space that recalls Hood's style of incorporating vignettes and loose linework alongside fashion model figures across an otherwise blank page. Over the years, extensive travel and additional studies in theatre design, literature and even traditional Japanese brushwork contributed to her distinct, strikingly intimate style that unites dry and fluid media including charcoal, graphite and pastel with acrylic, watercolour and collage. Her process often begins with drawing, but soon paint is added with a conscious awareness of space and flatness that brings to mind the deliberately composed sections of a stage set, with an atmosphere that informs the scene through colour, feeling or mood. Indeed, uman-sures refers to the figures in her paintings as her 'characters'.

She then works section by section, intuitively, reinforcing an area when required with collage for colour or texture, which can seem both random at times and marvelously deliberate at others. uman-sures compiles clippings, which she keeps—sometimes for years—before incorporating them into a work.

Breaking Blue, for instance, began unusually, with an antique Turkish vessel whose complex turquoise colour and curious shape uman-sures had admired on TV. Captivated by this intriguingly beautiful object, she painted it at the lower left hand corner. Although



A Fine Line

deborah uman-sures

September 15 - October 18, 2020

Often arduous and somewhat magical, the creative process requires a certain amount of generosity, discernment and above all patience—a willingness to allow the work to present itself to its creator. Art has always involved a complex dynamic between the artist and the artwork as it is coming into being, and then, if the artist is fortunate, “works are born as if out of the void” as Expressionist painter Paul Klee famously said of his own work. In the case of the mixed media paintings of Cobourg artist deborah uman-sures, the artist benefits greatly from expanses of time spent among her large canvases in her home as she slowly works on them, walking past them daily. She says “I do feel that the willing body learns a lot, and I believe that just by being with my paintings over time, they give me clues.”

the vessel proved to be the catalyst for the painting, it led nowhere for several years. Eventually, the painting's main character took shape and led her to incorporate the collage of a woman entering a screen door in a garden: it suggests, in a wonderfully poetic way, the telling of a secret. The eye is drawn to the centre of the canvas thanks to rosebud red lips and a green eye, and travels down amid intricate strokes of colour and crosshatching to a horizon which splits the image, as it trails off – a teacup, perhaps, or a hat resting gently below.

Also notable is her liberal use of blank space, which according to uman-sures is “a shape; it's never a leftover”. To her, the space around a character is as good as another object, a vital part of the work. Whether it's the pleasing natural qualities of raw linen upon which she so often works, or the gleaming white of primed canvas,

for her, “open and empty is beautiful.” As a teenager, influenced by a trend toward all white interiors in the fashion magazines, she says, “white became my religion”. When the eye registers the white space as a valid part of the composition, the work suddenly appears different, stronger, more complete. And why shouldn't blank space or raw canvas be considered equal to painted areas? *After the Rain* comes together agreeably through blocks of colour and texture. The delicately drawn features of both figures are simply anchored with a wrinkly russet rectangle glued in at their base, which adds texture and also serves to highlight the nearly diagonal split into painted and unpainted surface. Interestingly, it appears that one of the figures has been papered over with the side view of a young girl, creating a dynamic and mysterious energy.



It's almost Dawn 2020



After the Rain n.d.

This image of a male figure, often seen in profile at the upper right corner of the canvas, perhaps partially obscured, recurs several times throughout the show. Its effect is to reinforce the female character, who takes centre stage while he fades away, no longer a concern. In *It's almost Dawn*, the presence of the man hovers behind a door, pensive yet seemingly emerging from the canvas in line with the central figure, whose sharp bodice comes alive as the light hits the fabric and she is thrust, reluctantly perhaps? into the spotlight, to her other side is the gentle outline of a delicately inscribed female companion. A striking checkerboard element divides the painting into painted and 'unpainted' or in this case, seemingly unpainted areas. The rosy-cheeked woman resplendent in *Yellow Surge* certainly seems unconcerned with the male figure behind her, which although clearly not the focus, has been given almost equal space. Her pinkish cheeks are picked up at her cleavage, complemented by the softened yellows of her dress, marked as if to imply a subtle tweed or check. A collection of deep rose coloured papers, collaged at her throat, evoke a fashionable corsage. This character, while identical in format to *Breaking Blue*, came together very quickly. It was fun to paint and uman-sures worried that perhaps it was too easy, but, she says “some paintings come in a flash, and others make you wait. You can't control the speed”.

Once the viewer's eyes adjust to uman-sures' visual language, there is much to see. Detail is absolutely deliberate in her work, and she says: “I believe that almost every mark you make on an image needs to be treated with respect”, an attitude perhaps taken from the Japanese master who taught her traditional brushwork in Kyoto. And there are many marks to discover. If a drawing is a line going for a walk, these lines oftentimes seem surprised to have arrived at their eventual destination. The intimacy of line coupled with the artist's respect for empty or 'white' space, beckons the viewer into the work, where there is often a surprising complexity to be discovered. uman-sures tells the story of a well-known art critic whom she met in Tokyo. She was questioning him, but he refused to give an opinion on anything. He told her that everything has possibility and that if one doesn't say something good or keep one's mind open to the possibility of good, it limits the existence of that piece of artwork. He wanted to leave everything philosophically open because he didn't want to limit the potential for all kinds of interpretation. uman-sures said that hearing that was a turning point for her. And so it should be for us.

— Andrea Carson Baker

Art Gallery of Northumberland
artgalleryofnorthumberland.com 905.372.0333

Victoria Hall | West Wing, Third Floor 55 King St. W., Cobourg ON | K9A 2M2



Take me through the process when you approach a blank canvas. How do you begin? What is the thought in your mind?

Basically once I started being serious about painting, and not just doing one painting a year, I seemed to start by drawing a head, which maybe emotionally drew me back to drawing from a model. I usually stare at the canvas quite a bit, and then I just start a line drawing, and often it's in graphite for a start. If the line work seems ok then I would introduce paint, but until the head is drawn...has eyes, a nose, a mouth and has a structural line that shows the jaw and the skull, and when that works and if it registers as a worthwhile drawing, with an interesting face and head, then I think no more and carry on, my sense is of creating a character already. And it's the suggestion of a person, and that's my entry point into a narrative. Usually it's all spontaneous after that. Very occasionally I might think 'this character is this type, or I'll choose to put this colour...' or some feature to suggest a certain direction, but not often. And I expect that if it's a successful face, it clues you into the whole story. I rely on it. I'm the one who's chosen to make a painting, so it just keeps happening. I want it to be drawn beautifully, and sometimes it's hasty, and that doesn't mean it can't be hastily beautiful, but it may be quite minimal and have very little - it may be read by another person as inadequate.

How does the idea of time play a role in your work? Do you take a lot of time to complete each work or is it more of a start-to-finish process?

Once a work begins, the pace establishes itself. With a face or head begun with graphite that seems like a satisfactory statement, I would likely proceed to build body parts in any dry medium appropriate: charcoal, more graphite, oil pastel or linear painted lines. Sometimes the first figure is worked until most of the body and activity is established. Other times I continue developing the narrative by adding another character. Developing garments and patterning and additional props or elements continues the story. I often leave the canvas to allow thinking about the composition and narrative for the first 'heads'. I may return soon, or several days later. Some canvases get completed in a few weeks; many are worked on slowly, small areas at a time. Most are not considered finished until much later and in the meantime I may begin new ones. I have paintings that required two or three years to complete and some that seem always to be being re-assessed while a few...that were so directly painted that they required no back-tracking, and came together in a rich flood of my knowing exactly how to tell the story.

Do you reference images? I'm thinking of the painting *Breaking Blue*. You started with an object on the bottom left.

Very occasionally. I sometimes will with hands...because they're really difficult, so I do get someone to pose. And if not, I will look for a photographic reference. For *Breaking Blue*, I was watching an antiquities TV program, saw a primarily turquoise, enormous vessel, I suspected it was made of metal, it looked like you would carry something in it, had a shape and large stopper as a neck. It was an interesting shape. I found it

beautiful, it had other images brushed on, not just turquoise and so it stayed in my imagination. I did begin the painting with that.

You didn't attempt to portray it in a representational way, did you?

It's not clear what the object is, to me it was a magical, powerful image and I didn't know the true purpose of it but it was so beautiful it was more like a piece of artwork. I think I gave it that respect and let it be a piece of artwork that gave me a lot of joy.

You know, I never saw the series *Breaking Bad* but I loved the title. I used to try to write fiction and as a young person, I would often name characters with the letter B, The sound of the letter has always pleased me. I don't know at what stage I sought the name because I don't pick a name until I'm finished or close to it. Names are difficult, you don't want them to give away the painting or be banal...I often will flip through books of poetry and snaffle three words that feel good to me.

It's so poetic - The collage whispers into the ear of the character.

That painting must have taken two years of work, because I really did start with the vessel, and it didn't lead me anywhere for a long time. I had used that same size canvas and *Yellow Surge*-it was the identical format and that one came very quickly, it came together in a flash. It was fun and I almost worried it was too fast, but then I felt it was all there, so I stopped.

It's interesting how some come together quickly. You're looking at the starting point to lead you.

And some make you wait. You can't control the speed. And because I'm painting in the middle of my life, one good aspect I feel is that I'm walking past things in the paintings and I don't ignore them. I know the walking past and gazing at them is feeding me information if I need to still be learning about them, if they're not complete or I'm not satisfied with them. On the other hand, it becomes like all you can do is eat and sleep, and go past your paintings, and then go do them. I do feel that the willing body learns a lot, even if I don't consciously register what it is I think I'm seeing. I believe that just by being with them over time, they give me clues. I feel that. My eyes are scanning all over...

You have a background in illustraion, theatre, literature, Japanese brushwork. Which of these has most influenced your work?

I enjoyed thinking about this for sure. I ended up realizing that of those subjects, as much as I love literature, I prefer theatre text over literature, and Japanese brushwork...I did some in Japan, and that was mainly about understanding an aesthetic. I believe that almost every mark you make on an image needs to be treated with respect, and not just be slapdash. The brushwork master in Japan, said 'no, no, no' to most of the markings, and one or two he thought good. I realized that a lot of the ones he said 'no' to, I found very beautiful. The ones he thought were ok...I knew nothing and tried modestly to do something. Literature sticks in me, and the Japanese brushwork. But theatre was most important because I had studied theatre literature, and playwrights from many cultures and many countries, and had

attended plays in London with the very finest actors in the world and theatre is the big one for me, because it has everything, it has the live bodies, the writing and the visual presentation on the stage, and there's colour and costume.

There is an element of the set-piece in your work. Has theatre influenced your work in other ways?

The famous playwrights in England and France were a goal for me to see when I went to those countries...I had heard about French theatre from my mother. In the theatre you have the element of the set piece, and that frontal aspect is right there, for me. The costume and the placement of characters must work within that format. The surrounding has to be unifying and useful. The theatre of the absurd - which I absolutely adored, the simplicity of the few figures on stage and the puzzling dialogue...Beckett, Pirandello, Genet. Simplicity and power to the dialogue. My mother got me interested in film and theatre... theatre is just amazing. The narrative is the dialogue, somewhat. I think it's like if you invite people who don't know each other together, and then you witness what happens. There are small narrative influences, like some of the trees and greenery. The woman in her bikini with trees, *Bella* - that one I did on a whim but that version of the story was based on several instances when I was travelling alone by train in Italy. One of the conductors asked me out for lunch and I had to take the train the following day to find him, which I did, and we had a nice lunch together. I saw it as innocent, I felt he was a decent person. I've done many versions of that painting, the trees remind me of Italian cypress trees, and the marks in the sand...that was a positive narrative.

It's noticeable how your figures seem to emerge from the raw canvas, rather than having been placed on top of the canvas.

That's good, because that's how I feel about it. When authors are being interviewed, I keep hearing them say how characters 'emerge', it's similar, it's mysterious...their interest in doing the writing or painting somehow gets the characters to emerge.

Is it important to always have some white? To preserve some space? Is it balance?

For me open and empty is beautiful, I salivate when I see an empty beautiful space. Possibly because I grew up in a small house. When my brother was born, I must have been in junior high and a room was built for me in the basement and it gave me privacy and I got shelving. I was reading about young American designers in the fashion magazines about how they furnished their first apartments with old furniture. And everybody was making everything all white. My mother had black hair and tried not to be tanned...I was always trying to get her to wear white, I had a thing about white always, it always delighted me. The renovations that these young woman were doing served as models, and white became my religion. White is freedom and you can see dirt and get rid of it. I think of the space as a shape, it's never a leftover. That goes to my sense of space because I always resisted learning perspective, and I've had to teach it...so that made it very tricky. The space left, to me is as good as an object, it's part of the composition. Although it starts out a blank canvas, it's a canvas full of beautiful linen or gleaming white or whatever you want it to be. Its part of the picture. I've never dealt with deep space, or with technical ways of drafting. I was amazed at what could be done, but I had no desire to learn it. The flat isn't really flat-well it's good flat. I don't need to create an illusion of deep space to make myself feel it's needed in the painting. I consider it a puzzle, and I like to leave a few puzzles

so people don't know if something is an important shape or not, and where it is and what it does. So the background is no less important than the foreground. I started out having everything very flat and modeling tonally I did not do for a long, long time.

There is much to see in your work, so much detail that is easily overlooked, and because the work is so large, you can stand back and also come up close and see so much. It can come across as haphazard but I don't think it is.

That's beautiful that you said that. Detail is deliberate in my work. I always loved the finesse of a tiny brush, the idea that every mark counts. I have a sense of reverence for the whole thing, it's thrilling for me to hold a brush and make a good line, and if I don't make a good line I'll try again to make a good line. I find that's part of the love of the canvas, (the linen) is a beautiful fabric and it's an empty space which makes me happy. When there are tiny details, there is a treasure for people who do look long and hard. I wouldn't want to buy a painting that bored me after the first few viewings. I like there being surprises and things that people might not see for years after they have a painting. Doing the tiny stuff is exciting, the way the big stuff is exciting, except with the tiny stuff you have to close down and concentrate and with the big washes you have to allow yourself to really relax, it's not careless, it's just a different approach than the tiny details. I used to daydream all the time. In high school I was having dreams of people who had big hands...and I would wake up and realize I was dreaming of immense hands...I looked into it...maybe there was something I was trying to grasp. But it was a visual image to me. I got a sense of the body from that. Something in me propelled me to make big necks and hands...the big is powerful on its own, so maybe that excites me too.

Can you talk about the men who often appear in your work?

Yes as you noted there is sometimes a man in the corner. I stare at the composition endlessly and there is often a rectangle that I leave empty, with paint but no figure. In several of them I do have a male profile moving out. I read it that way because I've had a lot of liasions that I've left and they were with men. But none of the painted men were based on real life. In *Star Journey*, there is a charcoal outline of a man - he was the framer. But the figure in the painting doesn't look anything like the person. In *Yellow Surge*, there's another man in the corner. It could be a symbolic motif and I don't know that he connects with any particular man. If I draw (the male figures) well, as I did in *Yellow Surge*, then they are a positive not a negative to me. Plus it adds a simple moment to the canvas.

Are memories and the past a part of what inspires you?

Film would be an influence, also childhood memories. My mother was an artist and had a degree in education. She loved France but wasn't allowed to live there, and I got to do that in my life. She always had the French radio on. She got me admiring France, and knew about French literature. I'm grateful to her for all sorts of cultural stuff...she took me to the ballet and symphonies. I was really close to her as a female, as a teenager. I learned sewing skills from her. She taught math and had a powerful brain, she wanted to paint was too busy being a teacher and a mother. My parents really encouraged me. It would give them pleasure to see me doing what they enjoyed.