

NEW PERSPECTIVES: SASKATCHEWAN WOMEN ARTISTS 1981

"The traditional low profile of Saskatchewan women artists is rising as they come together to examine their heritage and plan for the future."

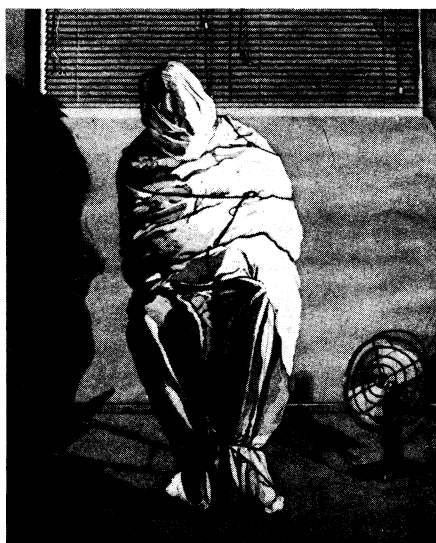
Doris Larson

Doris Larson pense que les femmes sont de plus en plus reconnues comme artistes. Dans cet article, elle en explique les causes.

It was 1980 and women in Saskatchewan, isolated from each other for too long, were finally getting together. Long prairie distances made it difficult for many of the same women to be present at all meetings. We were at different points in our professional development, some still students, others using school facilities, some with independent studios, women of all ages, from different backgrounds with differing degrees of involvement, commitment and development.

What we had in common was art. We were visual artists: painters, sculptors, potters, weavers, photographers, video filmmakers. It was exhilarating to be part of the group, discovering new people and ideas, hearing about old frustrations and doubts, but sharing and searching and reaching out regardless of how tentatively. Something was beginning. We were all aware of that.

In light of past contributions made by women in the arts in Saskatchewan and the age of the women's movement, it is surprising that these first meetings were being held in



1980. For all its social innovation Saskatchewan remains conservative. Pioneer roots here are deep and strong providing a sturdy link with a rural background and the onnipresent prairie landscape. A few women visual artists had 'made it': women who stayed in Saskatchewan, Dorothy Knowles and Reta Cowley; women who were expatriates, Agnes Martin, Ann James and Marily Levine. The old boys club did seem to have room for female membership.

To risk exclusion from the art system by breaking away to consider another heritage, to examine and question basic art school traditions and history, understandably made women artists feel anxious. There was always that old nagging fear that to be a woman and an artist was to be second-rate, not to be taken seriously. And to be married and have children and expect to be considered an artist! Why aggravate the situation by drawing attention to the fact?

In 1975, Carol Phillips, curator of the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina, organized an exhibition of the works of eleven prairie women artists. *Changes* toured centres in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. American artist Judy Chicago was invited to Saskatoon in 1980 by Shoestring Gallery to talk about her work and meet with the Shoestring membership. Chicago,

impressed by the quality of the experience asked to return to Saskatchewan in order to work on a cooperative project with the group. Something certainly was happening. Energy was building. The traditional low profile was rising.

Before we explore new directions, we must examine where we've come from. Women like the painter Hazel Stupnikoff (64) can be a link. She remembers her pioneer mother's rugs and embroideries, the excitement of watching her mother dye homespun threads for tassel rugs and the glorious colour of the wet threads as they were lifted from the dye pots on the stove and hung to dry. Hazel's daughter, an Edmonton gallery owner and artist is eager to know about her grandmother's embroideries and rugs with their curious designs and colours that were like no one else's.

We all need to make connections. We also need to know about our women of achievement in the arts. Lea Collins was the dynamic director of the Saskatoon Arts Centre from its beginning in 1944. She supported, she cajoled, she encouraged local artists. Using her influence as Visual Arts Consultant for the Saskatchewan Arts Board, she extended that support. Her encouragement of weaver Margreet Van Walsem initiated the development of visual arts in Prince Albert. Margreet's dedication to excellence and commitment was an inspiration to many. She organized the artist-in-residence program in that town and its first juried exhibitions. Others like potter Marline Zora, have been instrumental in organizing the craft movement in the province.

The pre-eminent landscape painter working in Canada today is Dorothy Knowles, a Saskatoon resident. Lorraine Malach, ceramic muralist and painter, works in Regina with determination and great spiritual energy. Her work has been commissioned for many public buildings. Ceramic sculptors Ann James and Marily Levine formerly worked and taught in Regina. Teachers and painters Wynona Mulcaster and Mina Forsyth both worked in Saskatoon for many years. These women made



3

significant contributions to their community and, by their example, encouraged other women.

The Shoestring Gallery has been a support system and a growing space for its members. It was started ten years ago by a handful of women as a simple marketing co-operative since there were no commercial galleries in the province. Today it operates as a non-profit society, an alternative to the public and commercial galleries that now exist.

The present membership includes two founding members, Ann Mills and Lorna Cutting and other mature professional artists as well as exciting newcomers like Wendy Coad and Honor Rogers. Unlike its commercial counterparts, the gallery represents no one style or medium. Figurative and abstract, painting and pottery, traditional or experimental, the atmosphere has vitality.

Like the Shoestring Gallery, many community art galleries in smaller centres are almost completely staffed by women volunteers. It is impossible to name or credit all the women who donate their time and

energy. They learn to pack and hang shows and to negotiate with town councils and provincial funding agencies.

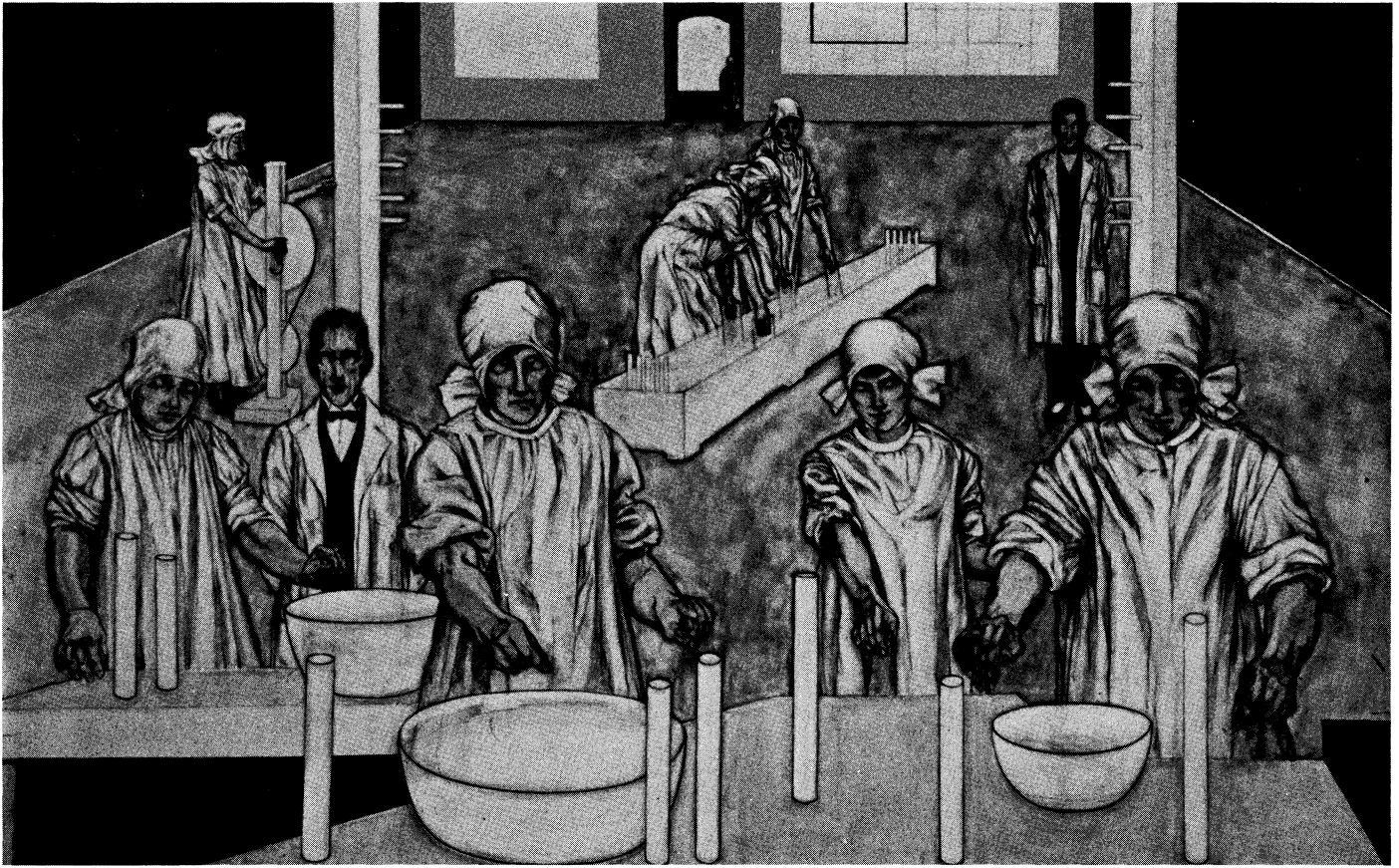
Liz Dowdeswell, Deputy Minister of Culture, heard from hundreds of people involved in the arts, during the provincial cultural policy review hearings that were held province-wide in February and March of 1981. A high proportion (especially at the so-called amateur and volunteer level) were women.

Sixty-eight-year-old Janet Fietz, from the northern community of La Ronge, works a trapline inherited from her husband. She tans the hides herself and exquisitely beads jackets and mocassins that she makes. She pleaded that these old skills be recorded as local history before they are lost.

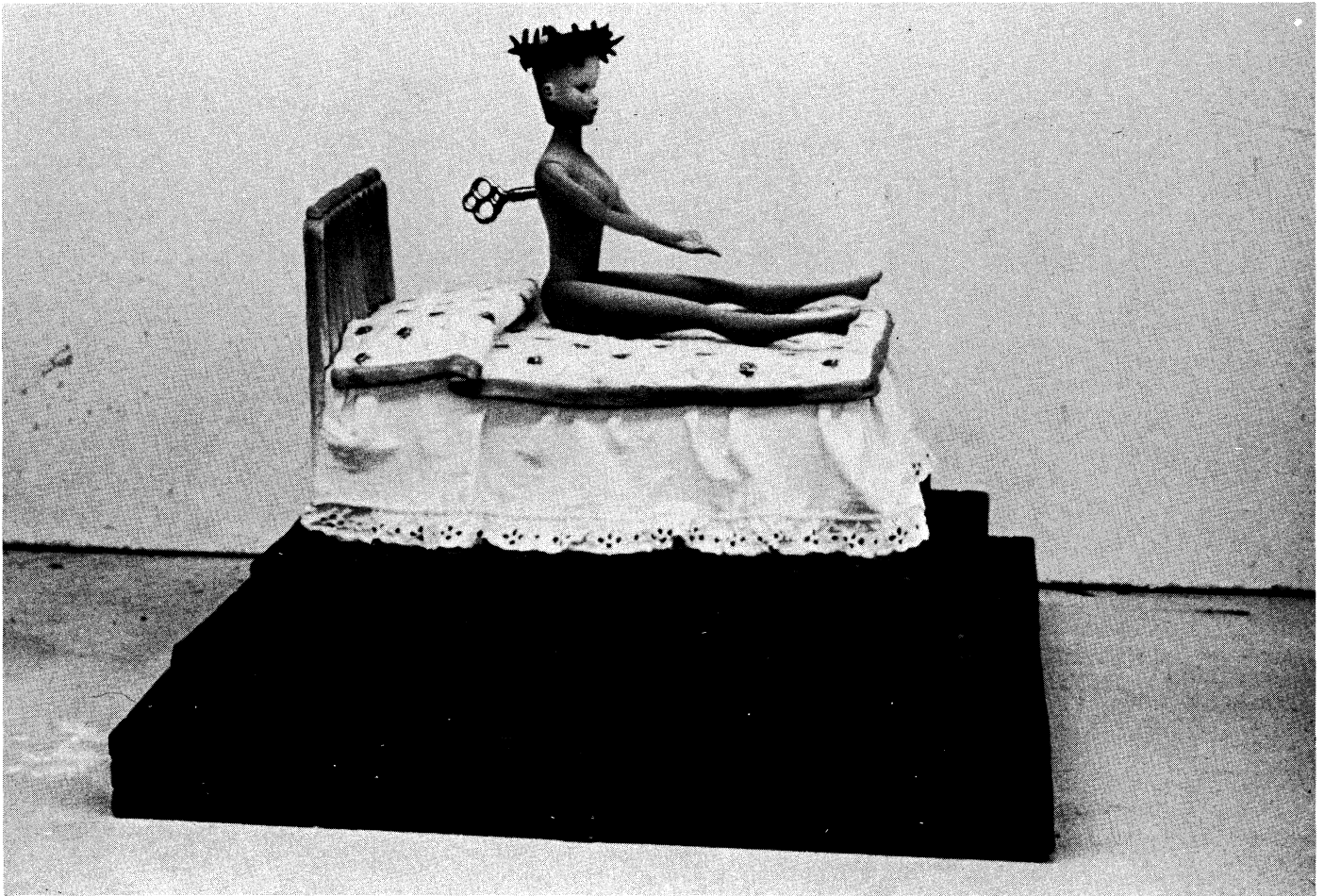
Three homemakers, two teachers and a painter from the hamlet of Meadow Lake incorporated themselves as a non-profit society whose purpose is 'to research, produce and distribute video tapes portraying women in a variety of economic and social roles in northwestern Saskatchewan. And then there are the Battleford Quilters who have cooperatively made a business from what was once social activity.

How can all this energy and activity be channelled, focused and communicated? By our meetings we break down barriers and prejudices and allow the unexpected to happen. At the same time, we strive as women artists for more representation and participation in galleries and exhibitions, in education and government institutions. We also want to re-examine these institutions.

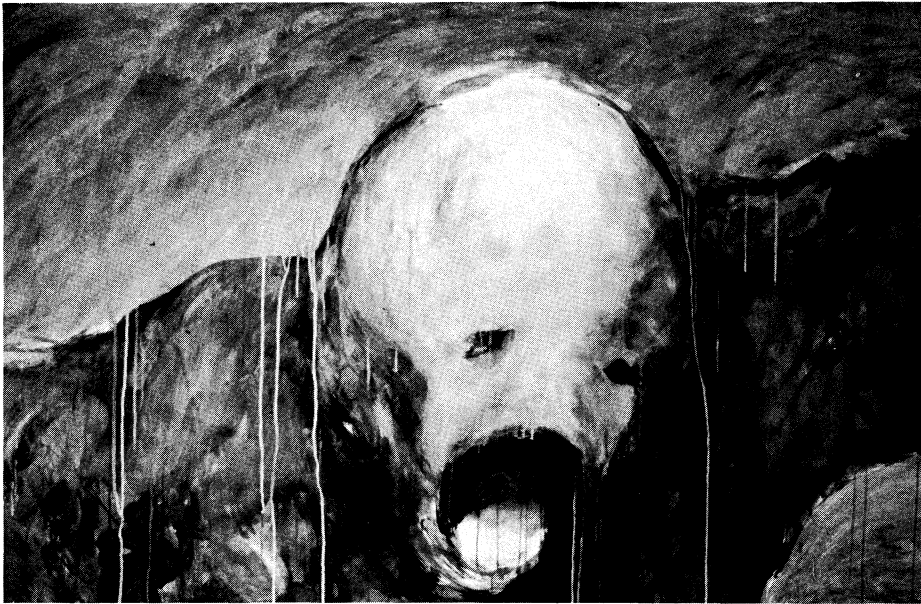
Women like Lucy Lippard, a guest lecturer at the Norman Mackenzie Gallery, inspire us to consider the diversity of art, its nature and function in society. The art history we are taught in school is so narrow. We look forward to fall 1983 when the Western Development Museum, the Mendel Gallery and the Shoestring Gallery collaborate on three concurrent exhibits of contemporary works by individual women and women's historical artifacts. Once this door is open, the possibilities are limitless.



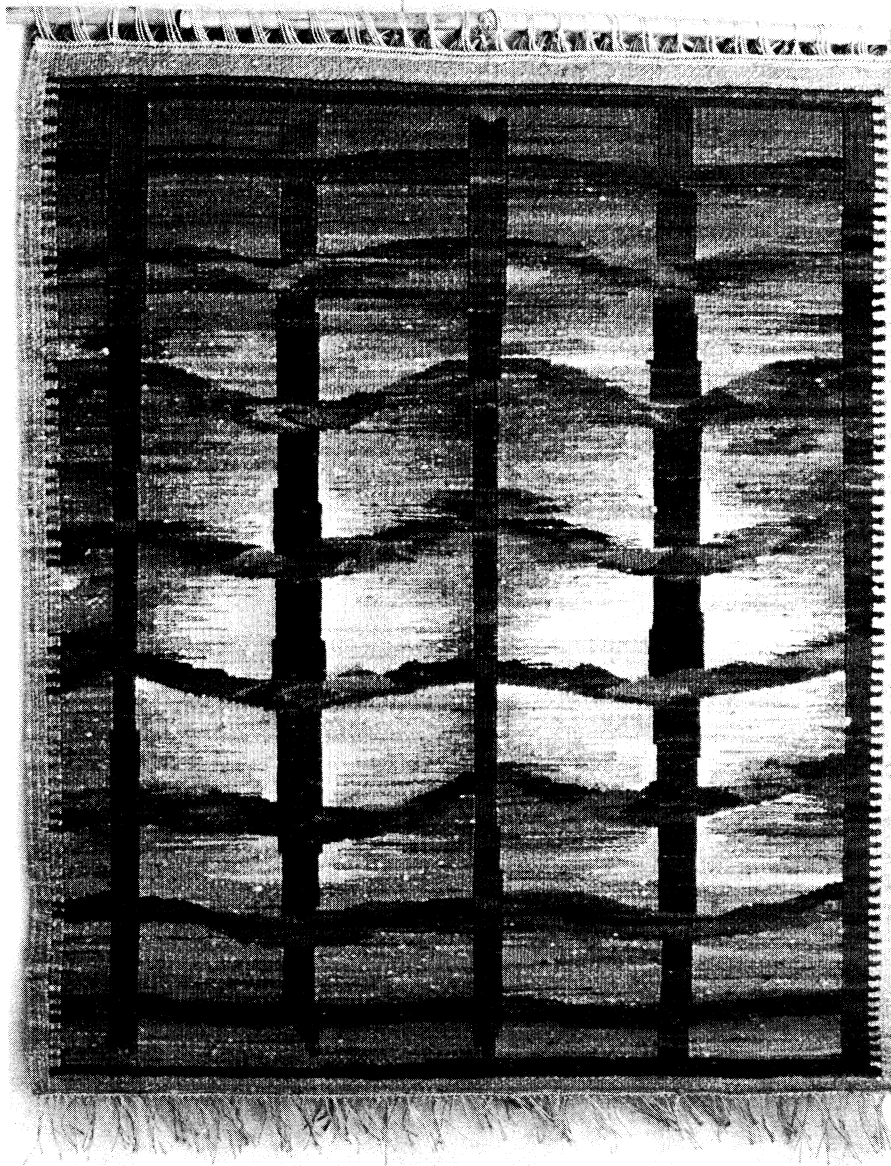
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- 1 *Getting Droned*, Rogers.
- 2 *Lancashire Gothic*, 1977, St.-George, litho.
- 3 *Untitled*, 1980, Coad, acrylic on rag paper
- 4 *Secret Rites in the Kit-Gut Factory*, St.-George, oil, acrylic, charcoal, pencil
- 5 *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, 1979, Arkell, low fire clay
- 6 *Untitled*, 1980, Coad, acrylic on rag paper
- 7 *Rug Cage*, 1980, Newdigate Mills, tapestry
- 8 *Polish Coffin*, 1971, Malach, oil and ceramic

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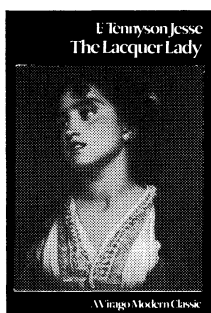
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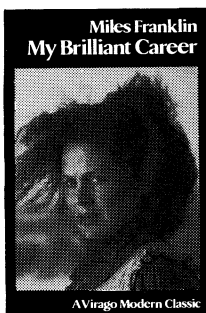
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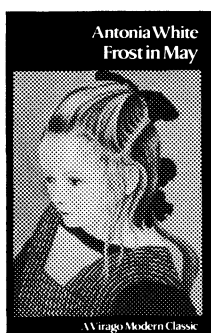
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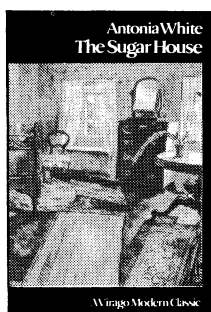
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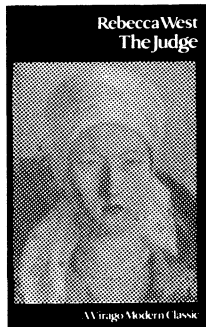
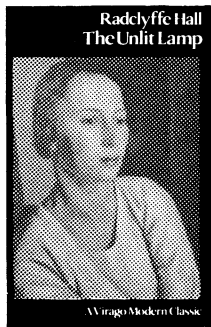
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