

SASHA McINNIS- HAYMAN

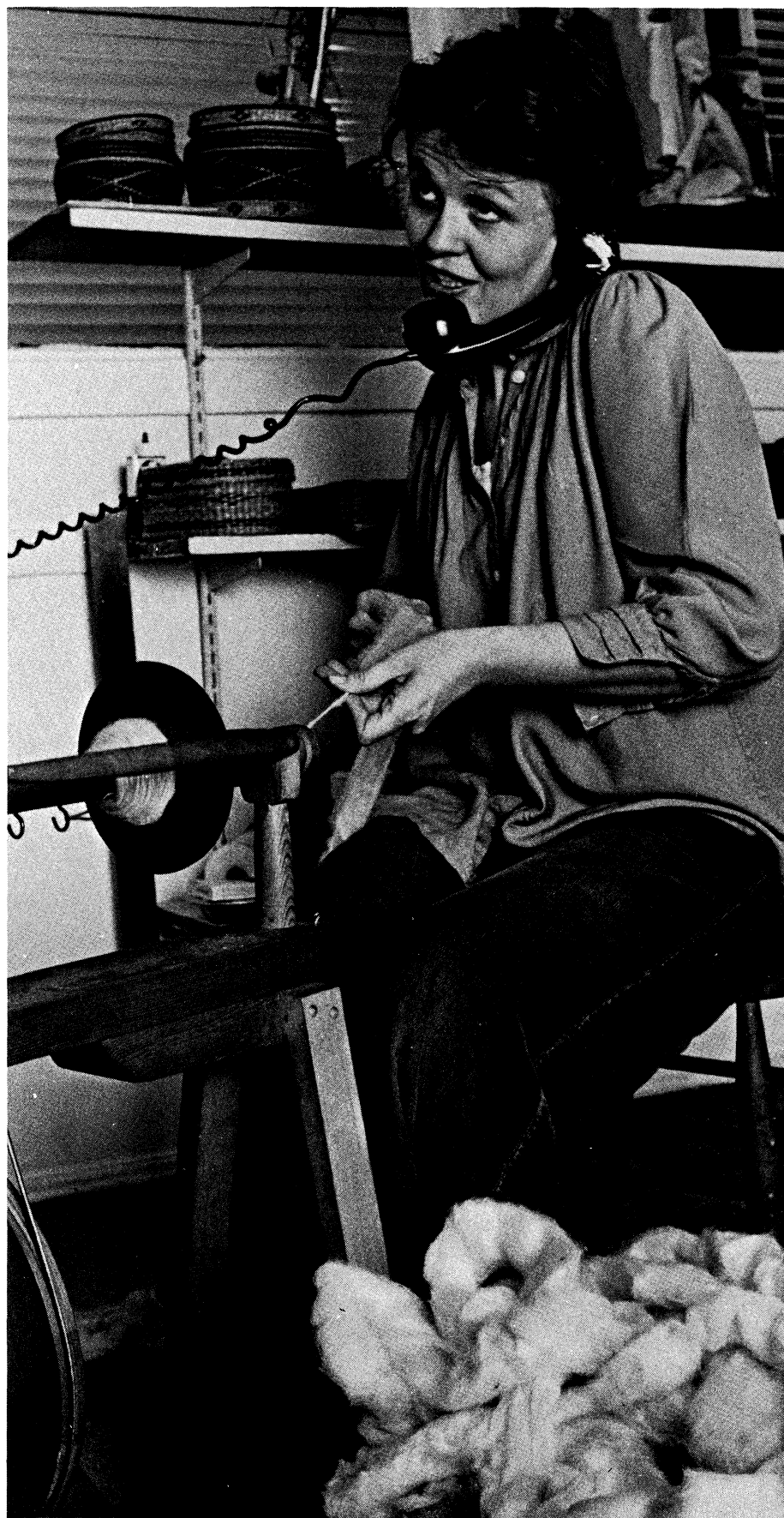
Susannah Joyce-Jones

Sasha McInnes-Hayman, créatrice de tissages, croit qu'on ne peut séparer la vision esthétique de l'action politique.

Sasha McInnes-Hayman is a weaver of tapestries, dreams, ideas and culture. Through her artwork and political involvement, she is committed to improving the situation of arts-related women in Canada and to enhancing Canadian culture by making their contributions more visible.

Working out of two spaces, Fibremoon Studio and Womanspirit Art Research and Resource Centre in London, Ontario, she coordinates a number of projects relating to women and culture. At her studio, one encounters several pleasant, light-filled rooms, with comfortable cushions and wicker baskets of bright, soft-coloured wool which she spins and dyes. Her sensitivity to colour was developed in Peru, where she was raised and educated. While working on her MFA, she apprenticed for several summers with a weaving family whose techniques are centuries old. Her artistic career began in earnest when she moved from Lima to Canada.

At Fibremoon, there are usually several tapestries, stretched onto large frames, in various stages of completion. There may be a brilliant butterfly, a spiral shell, or the image of a woman dancing by the sea on them. Into the right hand corner of every piece is woven an inverted triangle and a waxing cres-



cent moon, symbols of women's power — Sasha's logos. Spinning and weaving are themselves,

emblems of the feminine principle, and the symbol of the Great Goddess is central to her work.

'I see the Goddess as a symbol — the "great round" as Gloria Orenstein refers to it — a symbol of who we've been, who we are and who we can be as women — a symbol of our power as women unto ourselves, not defined by any man.'

For McInnes-Hayman, art is not only a means of personal fulfillment, it is also an effective tool for political and social change.

'The concept of women's culture is a controversial one within the women's movement and many feminists criticize it as being apolitical. Radical and social feminists also claim that cultural feminists are retreating from political struggle.'

'However, women's art is a lifeline to self-recognition and to making our lives meaningful. If the only images available to us, are those created by men, we cannot develop a positive self-image — we will not have the power, freely given to every male in our culture, to identify ourselves.'

'Many women artists are working in a variety of disciplines and are creating alternative images of women and our lives. Artists are contributing significantly to the movement against pornography and violence against women, by making visible images that do not degrade women, nor tell lies about us.'

'Robin Morgan asserts that a political revolution that does not take its artists seriously, and does not see aesthetic vision as inseparable from all political action — is by definition, a patriarchal revolution.'

'We must stop using women's culture as an adjunct to political activity. We must stop using women's art as a fundraising tool. In some ways the women's movement treats its artists the same way that society does in general — as frills, eccentrics, regarded as irresponsible participants.'

'Because the art establishment has long been dominated by men, the assumption that male culture is culture, that Canadian male culture is Canadian culture, has gone without challenge. The standards used to judge the art of women are inappropriate. Our work is often

misunderstood, frequently ignored or dismissed. The act of creating is extremely powerful because we learn who we are through what we see, read and hear. The impact of the various arts on society must not be underestimated by feminists committed to change.'

In an effort to assist arts-related women to develop a strong self image, McInnes-Hayman began *Womanspirit* in 1977. From a small collection of historical slides, the organization has evolved into a growing body of research, including more than 3,000 slides, a reference library and a collection of biographical data on a great number of Canadian artists.

'Although Canadian women have always been involved in the arts and in interpreting our culture, little historical data is readily available relating to this subject, for the young woman art student. Women have been denied access to the institutions in which our cultural and artistic heritage could be preserved.'

'Without a heritage from which to draw, on which to base and give affirmation to our ambitions, our visions, experience and perspective — women function in a socio-cultural vacuum with only male models to emulate. What women do depends on the training we have had, the criteria we are taught to apply, the models we are exposed to. Defying the *status quo* is not a simple task and with no ideological perspective, women artists will simply imitate the techniques and subjects which suit and please the visible minority.'

As a result of research by *Womanspirit*, information is now available about more than 600 women working as professional artists in Canada before 1930 — thus providing contemporary women artists with a heritage. *Womanspirit*, is also a storefront gallery exhibiting works by and about women and is the scene of lectures, workshops, readings and performances.

Womanspirit has been instrumental in creating a network of arts-related women across the country, providing important information on the political aspects of the arts. One result of this networking is *Festival*

'82, a celebration of women and the arts, originated by McInnes-Hayman. Now a series of arts celebrations will be held in many parts of the country, creating a vital and positive communication amongst a great number of women, both urban and rural, nationally and provincially.

McInnes-Hayman occupies a unique and valuable position for interpreting the various needs and concerns of Canadian women in the arts. For the past 18 months she has worked as Visual Arts Consultant to Status of Women Canada. Her work for them includes the preparation of a comprehensive report on the status of women as artists in Canada.*

Part of the change must come from women artists themselves. McInnes-Hayman believes in solidarity amongst women in the arts. Information must be shared, acknowledgement of one another's accomplishments must be freely given and the common goal must receive high priority.

'Some arts-related women are reluctant to take radical stands or to employ radical methods, but unless the reports we submit are accompanied by appropriate lobbying by women, they are in danger of being dismissed.'

Women should ponder these words and act upon them. We must keep the history and activity of women alive, visible and available, as a bridge to the next generation.

If you are interested in becoming involved in these issues write to Sasha McInnes-Hayman at 237A Dundas Street, London, Ontario N6A 1H1.

** Women and the Ontario Arts Council
A Study Prepared by Sasha McInnis-Hayman. Copies available from:
237A Dundas Street
London, Ontario
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Due to space constraints we are unable to print the full text of this report which shows that women are still consistently under-represented as grant recipients of arts funding in Ontario.

Photo courtesy London Free Press