

3 INTERVIEW : Molly Lamb Bobak



A view of several recent canvases in Mrs. Bobak's attic studio.

Photos by Rudi
by Elizabeth Smith

Molly Lamb Bobak, wife of Bruno Bobak, director of the art-centre, is a well known Canadian artist. This week she has an exhibition of her paintings in a large commercial gallery in Toronto. Most of the paintings on display were conceived by Mrs. Bobak as she watched the last march of the Black Watch Canadian Regiment in Fredericton last fall. The paintings are not about soldiers, but about the drama and emotion felt by Mrs. Bobak on that last day.

There is no compliment in having a commercial exhibition, Mrs. Bobak says, but there is the value, of "getting a reassessment in seeing yourself hanging."

"Commercial dealers do not exhibit what they like, they try to sell the works. The critics try to say something nice, because the gallery is paying for advertising in their newspapers," she says. "A showing in a public gallery is a compliment."

All the paintings had local subjects - parades and demonstrations in Fredericton - with no attempt to make a social comment. Mrs. Bobak admits, though, "I have one hope with my paintings that what I produce is universal in feeling. One works for a big intellectual idea. But it is waste of energy to care whether my art is universal. The important thing is that I'm excited about my work."

Permanence is not really important in art, thinks Mrs. Bobak, but most artists do yearn for it. In one breath she says, "Who cares if it lasts," and in the next, "In a way I do paint for permanence - I size my canvases and buy good oils."

She also feels that if an artist wants to show to the public, than the artist must feel a certain commitment to the public.

As she explains, "Anything that turns you on, you can do. But once you decide to have a happening, a showing, and you want to include other people in your experience, then it takes a lot more than just doing your thing on the stage. Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think anyone is interested in just someone expressing themselves." At this she throws her arms upward in the gesture of abandon so many of the young painters typify.

This idea, that paint is more than a means for letting your emotions run free, is perhaps the main thing Molly Bobak tries to teach her art classes. Since coming to UNB ten years ago, Mrs. Bobak has held regular weekly extension courses in painting. She loves teaching, and becomes very animated talking about it.



A recent, and as yet unnamed painting by Molly Bobak.

"I don't want to make artists out of people in my classes, I just want to make them aware. People don't come out with a style or as finished artists. I teach ideas about space, tension, the language of painting."

By the language of painting Mrs. Bobak is referring to translating natural vision into art by intelligence and feelings, and the understanding of the medium.

"If you choose painting as a way of saying something, then you accept certain things about the medium. Acrylics, water-colours, oil, each have limitations and restrictions. You have to manipulate the medium to say what you are trying to say. It doesn't have to be conventional use, but it must be true to the materials."

"If you paint a river, you use it to understand the river - the blue, the movement - not just a copy of the river."

It is movement that Molly Bobak finds most exciting to express. She most commonly paints masses of people - in parades, on the beach, skating, or just walking on the street. She claims she paints large canvases filled with people because she loves "the movement, the humanity."

"I guess, I'm more interested in people than anything," she says. "I love what people do together and apart. People mean more to me than nature. I really find people stimulating."

Each oil canvas usually takes a long time to complete, and often she goes back to retouch a painting after being away from it for weeks. Her water-colours, which often serve as sketches for the oils, rely on complete spontaneity. She says if a water-colour takes more than two hours it doesn't work. Often ten water-colours are painted on a theme.

Mrs. Bobak describes herself as a "comfy" artist. She needs to be comfortable in her environment to be able to paint. Usually she paints oils only of flowers and lots of water-colours when she leaves Fredericton for an extended period. If she is away for a short time and can't paint at all, Mrs. Bobak becomes frustrated and irritable.

"I think I'm rather a moral person - I believe in work."

"I think I'm rather a moral person - I believe in work." Molly Bobak has a seldom broken schedule of painting each morning from 9 to 12 in her studio in the attic of her home. She believes it is this rigid work



Molly Lamb Bobak talking about her painting.

routine that distinguishes the amateur from the professional artist.

"Hundreds of people have talent. The difference between an amateur and a professional is that the professional goes up to the studio even when he doesn't feel passionate."

In line with this belief that everyone has talent, she thinks that an artist is born through circumstance. In her own case, she hated school and insisted on leaving as early as possible, so her parents enrolled her in the Vancouver School of Art.

Molly Lamb Bobak's father was a patron of the arts and encourager of the Group of Seven, so she was in particularly fortunate circumstances for exposure to painting as a way of life.

After graduation from art school she joined the army. It was almost automatic to join the army in the war years. Most Canadian women were volunteering to do their bit to fight Hitler. As she explains,

"You didn't have to think. Your values were all made for you. Hitler was bad."

It was late in the war that Molly Bobak was made the only female War Artist. She went to officer's school and was then sent to London, England. In London she met the other Artists and later married the artist who shared her studio, Bruno Bobak.

The main advantage to being a War Artist, according to Molly Bobak is the public exposure in Canada one received. Newspapers frequently carried stories on the artists and their paintings were shown much more than other young artists. Most young painters have to go from gallery to gallery trying to have their work shown. War Artists automatically had their work shown in the National Gallery in Ottawa.

The paintings are the property of the government and are still shown in rotation at the National Gallery. On their return to Canada after the war, the Bobaks lived in Ottawa for awhile and then moved to Mrs. Bobak's hometown, Vancouver.

The Bobaks first came to Fredericton in 1960. To Maritimer's British Columbia sounds like the promised land. The lush, rugged country we love, but with a temperate climate. Mrs. Bobak admits that she still feels B.C. is "God's Country", but it is too large scale for her. She says it is the dimensions of New Brunswick that she loved from the start. Before she left Vancouver, Mrs. Bobak's mother said to her, "Oh, Molly, when you see New Brunswick you will never leave."

She probably never will.