

ROAD-TRIPPING THE RIVER AND RAIL ART TRAIL 2021

REPORT 2 OF 2 FROM MARGARET BESSAI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GERALD SAUL



Skudesnes Harbour performing in Loreburn [2 of 3 band members pictured]

In our last issue, I interviewed Janet Akre and Susan Robertson, the organizers of the River and Rail Art Trail, as they were getting ready to host their first self-guided studio tour week-end on June 26-27, 2021. Coordinating with 50 artists in 10 communities, the tour was set to wind through 26 venues in Outlook, Broderick, Macrorie, Tugaske, Riverhurst, Central Butte, Davidson, Hawarden, Loreburn, and Elbow. Organized as an art market, but in reverse, the event invited the public to come out to local galleries, studios, workshops, and farms to meet artists and makers in the places they work.

This June, I drove the tour, recruiting my family to navigate and take photographs. Taking advice from the organizers, we planned the trip in two sections. Saturday began in Davidson and looped through Outlook and area. Sunday started in Tugaske and ended in Riverhurst. It was a great weekend, but I must apologize to the artisans in Macrorie—we sadly ran out of time and were not able to see Rose Kendall's greenhouse, or the workshop studios hosted by wood workers Millicent Leugner, and Larry and Shirley Parks. I hope to visit next year.



Cindy Megaw, DaisyAnne Pottery Studio

Our drive was a quintessential Saskatchewan summer road-trip, rolling through blue skies and sunny fields. We headed up to Davidson, and then west. Once we were off the divided highway and taking local roads, it was a comfortable drive through pasture land, past yards with rows of hopper-bins and miles of canola fields, only slowing down to share the road with a swather, and trucks pulling campers and boats. The maps and signage were excellent, and the route took us toward the river, and cottage country. We've driven many places in the prairies, but this studio tour gave us an invitation to stop into towns and farmyards, and to meet people. We felt a welcoming sense of community at every site along the tour.



Philip Muri in Central Butte

Our first stop was a beautifully renovated bank building in Davidson. Gail Prpick's home-studio "And Art Gallery" featured an exhibition of landscapes and abstract works by Prpick and Sandra Knoss, and western-themed drawings by Darryl Sweet. Although the tour day had just begun, Prpick told us that she had already welcomed a steady number of visitors. From there, we headed over to Broderick.

On the way, we turned into a farmyard to visit the Lee's Bees and MissBeeHaven site hosted by Lee and Judy Genereux, and Tina Leverton and family. Lee took us over to meet his hives, a particularly gentle strain of honey bees. Tina and Judy ran the pop-up shop with honey, candles and other bee products. I am always interested in the ways that small businesses and artists handle sales and marketing details, and I was curious about their digital POS system. Tina said that her research led her to use Helcim, a service based in Calgary, which offers 24 hour live support. She said that set up was easy, and since the software ties into Quickbooks, it also makes her accounting more efficient. Even though we were in a tent in a field, the wireless terminal worked flawlessly.



Susan Robertson in Broderick

Thinking about the connection that this tour made between agri-business and art, I was reminded that in addition our large-scale bee farmers (Saskatchewan produces a quarter of all Canadian honey), there are a growing number of urban and artisanal beekeepers, and artists who are interested in bees. This summer, for example, the Art Gallery of Regina initiated a project connecting regional artists, beekeepers and bees in a partnership with four galleries across the province under the guidance of a professional beekeeper, and a senior artist and bee-collaborator. (“Between Us” is a long-term creative project connecting senior artist Aganetha Dyck with selected artists, beekeepers and honeybees in Regina, Yorkton, Swift Current, Estevan and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan taking place from 2021-2022.)

Just up the road from the bees, tour organizer Susan Robertson welcomed us into a brand new facility in Broderick, a storefront and workshop that she built this winter with her family. A juried Craft Council member, Robertson works in hand-built, functional stoneware.



Janet Akre in Outlook

Her stenciled and carved decorations are based primarily on the local animals and plants, such as bees, crows, racoons and moose, but she also has designs inspired by her Celtic heritage, and her daughter's cooking blog, "Hurry up, I'm hungry!"

As we continued the tour, driving to Outlook, I considered the links between artists and place. The relationship between land and art may seem obvious as subject matter in the genre of landscape painting, but as the late plein-air painter Mike Keepness said, "for me, being out on the land and painting is more than visual. I understand what our Elders mean when they state that everything is interconnected - The same way that colors reflect and shape each other throughout the land." A Saulteux/Plains Cree artist, Keepness had grown up in the Qu'Appelle valley in Treaty 4 territory, and this was also where he worked, "The area that I paint is where my tribe had buffalo jumps, hunting areas, and ceremonial grounds that ensured their survival.... I have to capture the essence of the land, and the historical sites of my culture for future generations."



Don Rode of Riverhurst

Landscape painter Edie Marshall, who is based in Riverhurst and took part in the studio tour, has a similar approach to painting. A third-generation settler, she has several bodies of work that combine her love of the prairie grasslands with her concern for the ecology here. Her newest series on abandoned structures, “Prairie Remains”, reflects on the settler history in the southern plains, experiences and social change that Marshall’s family has lived. As Marshall explains, her images of local “ghost houses” are meditations on stories of “loss, hope and continuity of life”. The connection between artist and place is also very clear in the work of Philip Muri, a folk artist on the tour, but expressed in a very different way. Muri’s artwork reflects his lifetime of experience as a rural veterinarian and rancher in Central Butte. The sense of liveliness in his carvings is rooted in an intimate knowledge of animals. His wry sense of humour and cutting political observation comes out in his paintings and sculpture. In one image, a cow protests being blamed for producing greenhouse gasses as she looks out over the pasture to the factories and refineries belching smoke. (While showing us around his studio, Muri added, “Cows don’t fart- they belch.”)

We found the centre of the River and Rail tour in the town of Outlook, both a hub for agri-business and, as it is perched on the valley edge overlooking the South Saskatchewan river, a community attracting retirees and summer homes. At each tour stop here, we met people who really love making things. Willie Schachtel for example, is a master of wood-burning, and creates large scale images with detailed shading. The community also seemed supportive.

Julie Williams held her pop-up shop in Jacq'y Jayes Boutique & Espresso Bar, and described the people in Outlook as encouraging, often commissioning her work. While we were in the store, fellow tour visitors recommended the vibrant exhibit of quilt and fibre art at the Art Gallery of Outlook. (It was spectacular.) Stopping in to the newly opened Single Strand Fibre Studio, we met some of the exhibiting artists, needle-felter Toshia Sparks and her business partner Cathy Merkeley. They both raise Alpacas, and in the studio they spin and dye yarns, felt and knit, teach classes, and sell materials.

A Single Strand Fibre Arts is also a hub for yarn production; they buy wool and Alpaca fibres from the region, and have it processed in Alberta at Custom Mills or Exotic Fibers. Here, we also met Eli Dingle, a local teacher, photographer, and stone carver. For the tour, the historic train station and museum in Outlook hosted a market with jewelry, baking, wood-working, and artisanal soap. In the band shell, local author Tony Peter held readings on the hour.

During the tour, I enjoyed exploring the work spaces that each artist hosted. In Outlook, painter and tour organizer Janet Akre held her exhibition in her garage gallery. When her family moved in 26 years ago, the large yard was empty of landscaping. She and her husband built workspaces, planted trees, and developed a garden setting which gives a place to both family and painting time.

Her neighbour Dale Hicks built his studio ten years ago. It is an L-shaped workshop that allows him to close off the clean work area from his larger welding and sculpture area. In Elbow, Cindy Megaw used a similar approach on a smaller scale to renovate a garden shed into a pottery studio with a small shop display.

Bill Frerichs had a 2-part garage, with a newer, insulated area in the front, and a door leading to the old garage in back, with his mechanics workbench and tools. Another artist in Outlook, Sally Laidlaw creates quilts and runs her business PawPrints Embroidery Designs out of her home-studio, a large, contemporary house built overlooking the river valley.

While we enjoyed the spectacular view from her deck, Laidlaw explained her practical philosophy—her home needed to be a space for living and working, with room for dogs and grand-children, as well as neatly organized areas for her quilt materials, and her sewing and embroidery machines.

Leaving Outlook, we visited several more unique artist spaces on our way home. In the tiny community of Hawarden, a historical site that was built as a church in 1926 is now the Happy Chance Treasures Art Gallery. In 2020, Shawna Mitchell and Michael Ferguson collaborated to open the building to hold exhibitions, classes, and informal open-studio sessions. The original stained glass windows and a newly painted sky on the ceiling activate the space with creative energy.

Further south, Loreburn is home to several artists who have retired to live in the village. Lois Kurp paints in her studio in Victoria each winter, returning for summers in Loreburn. Up the street from her earring store and summer retreat is a renovated bank building where painter Shirley Pringle lives, surrounded by colourful canvasses, books and antiques.

Pringle grew up and attended art school in Calgary. Before Loreburn, she and her family lived in each of the western provinces and travelled the world.

We also met a musical group in Loreburn, “Skudesnes Harbour”, who played a concert each day in front of the brand new “SOH” boutique, named after the postal region in central Saskatchewan. As the day drew to a close, we said goodbye to the artists, and their friends gathered to go for dinner together.

This sense of interconnected and creative communities that we felt on Saturday continued through our Sunday stops. We began the day visiting Timeless Instruments, the studio workshop of renowned Luthier David Freeman. As he explained his approach to building guitars, he played several instruments to demonstrate their sound quality. A long-time Craft Council member, Freeman spoke about the value of fostering community and building creative networks. For the tour, he also hosted a local weaver, and a photographer.

When we stopped in Elbow, a village and resort on Lake Diefenbaker, the owner of Mugs Coffee Shop (which had amazing baking and great cappuccinos) encouraged us to visit the local potters, and the art show at the village office. There, the Elbow Art Society had displays throughout the top floor of the building, showcasing paintings and needle felting. The artists spoke about the validation they feel in working together and challenging each other with new techniques.

Georgina Horsley set up Grey Street Pottery about 10 years ago in Elbow, with space for classes, and a tiny shop at the back. She spoke about the importance of staying connected with peers, taking workshops, and participating in community firing events.

In the clay community, potters often collaborate to hold specialized kiln firing events, such as Raku, pit or salt firing. In Central Butte, wood turner and Craft Council member Keith Hampton spoke about his friendship with the carver Philip Muri. Our last stop was in Riverhurst with the painters Edie Marshall, and Don Rode. Each artist we spoke with felt that the tour had brought them together, and that discussing their work with visitors was energizing.

At each stop on the tour, we also spoke with fellow visitors about their experiences. As the organizers had done an excellent job of promoting and organizing the event, we found that people were touring from all across Saskatchewan, and from places as distant as Edmonton and Red Deer.

After a year of isolation during the pandemic, many felt that now that they were vaccinated, it was the right time to travel and visit. For some, it was their first time exploring off of the major highway; for many, it was an invitation to return to places of connection, and to visit with friends and family along the way. For me, it felt really special to be invited into so many homes and studios, to freely ask questions, and to talk about art and life. Thank you!

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Margaret Bessai, B.A., is a Regina based writer and visual artist. Community, family, and collaboration are important to her work and her life. Since 1999 she has worked with Dunlop Art Gallery as a part-time facilitator, an arts-education position to provide exhibition support in the form of tours and conversation in arts and culture, and includes workshop assistance, research, and writing.



Outlook Quilt Show (Part of the River and Rail Tour, see story pg. 12)



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