

Bold brushstrokes and silent conversations

LINDA ROGERS

Trading in an art gallery in Wells for the life of an artist in Victoria, Marie Nagel has found her voice.

Marie Nagel has chosen an eagle view for her studio apartment on Douglas Street. From her superior position across from Beacon Hill Park, she has northern light and a view of Esquimalt and the Strait of Juan de Fuca. She can see her beloved trees and beaches and the gardens in between.

We're meeting in the morning and there is still a light fog, which fills her well-fenestrated flat with soft light. We could be birds. I am flying because I have just planted a drive-by kiss on my infant granddaughter who lives in the MacLure house next door, and Marie is soaring in anticipation of her first group show with fellow artists at the Morris Gallery in Victoria.

There are two kinds of painters, the tidy ones and the messy ones. Marie is one of the former. She keeps her archives neatly stacked in her bedroom and her living room studio is professionally maintained, with her brushes and paints arranged on a worktable against the back wall and her recent paintings hung on the walls so she can "live with them," and tweak them as they adapt to her living space.

When Nagel acknowledges the influence of Vancouver painter Gordon Smith, my childhood mentor, I think to myself that she not only channels the West Coast as he does, but also has his fastidious painterly habits.

Marie, who was born just south of Saskatoon and grew up in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, has brought the prairie light to her current oeuvre, paintings of landscapes and gardens, which has been modified by the temperament of the ocean. James Bay has the most volatile climate in Victoria and she clearly thrives on its personality. Her paintings, also influenced by Van Gogh and the Canadian Group of Seven, are characterized by bold brushstrokes and post-impressionist chiaroscuros.

So often, "spontaneous" works best in producing the tonal images that she most enjoys creating. In the words of one of our most beloved bards, Leonard Cohen, truth comes through the cracks that let in the light.

Nagel's paintings are vivid reflections of a world whose language we have otherwise failed to understand. There are many eloquent portraits of logs lying on the beach in silent conversation. "Are these political paintings?" I ask.

"No!" She is emphatic. "I paint what I feel, with no agenda. The paintings speak for themselves."

The child of Mennonites raised on the land, her mother a beautiful seamstress and her father a sewing machine salesman, Marie spoke German until she went to school. I know from writers Andreas Schroeder and Harold Rhenisch (whom Marie credits as her favourite poet) that growing up "German," even with a paci-

PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL

Photo left: Marie Nagel with her painting "In the Red Again."



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"Across the Strait" 30 x 30 inches, acrylic on canvas

first family history, was difficult between and after the two world wars that defined the last century.

Marie was and still is a shy person. Then as now, she expresses herself in her art. "My paintings are my voice." Her intention is to quietly gather the beauty in glowing acrylic paintings, silently praising the natural world that gives her so much pleasure.

"I love the physical act of painting," she confesses, as if playing with paint were a guilty pleasure like eating chocolate.

"On the Road Again" 24 x 30 inches, acrylic on canvas



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"Waterfront" 30 x 30 inches, acrylic on canvas

While attending the Alberta School of Art, she discovered photography, delighting in framing the moments that pass if they are not captured in snapshots, poems, songs, and paintings. She then dropped out of school to work as a photographer, married the father of her adult son, and moved to Prince George, where she took over the directorship of a foundering gallery and turned it around.

Later, on her own, Marie moved to Wells, where she converted an old Anglican church into a successful gallery. Because Interior winters are harsh, demanding the stamina of youth, she recently sold the historic building to two Vancouver artists. Now, after 17 years in Wells, she finds herself in Victoria, among friends who have also moved to the West Coast, and majestic trees, mercurial waters and changing light—chief characters in her interior drama.

Today, Marie is part of the *Al fresco plein air* painters who meet every week and will be part of the "Spring Equinox" show at Morris Gallery this month. If her paintings are her voice, then this association with other painters is a choir, an example for all

of us in maintaining individuality while functioning as a community. This is the way quiet Marie Nagel gets to sing.

Marie Nagel will appear in the "Spring Equinox" group show at the Morris Gallery, 102-428 Burnside Rd., Mar 12 to April 3. The opening reception is Mar 12, 7-9pm with artists in attendance. Artists include: Marie Nagel, Keith Hiscock, Linny D. Vine, Jeffrey Boron, Marlene Howell, Joanne Thomson, Jim McFarland, Ron Wilson, Desiree Bond, Miriam Nelken, Bob McPartlin, D.F. Gray.



Linda Rogers, Victoria's Poet Laureate, will be celebrating two new books this spring: *Muscle Memory*, poetry, and *The Third Day Book*, the second novel in her Empress trilogy.