



THE SHARED LIVES OF ARTISTS

BY ALICE DIXON

In May 2006, two artists, Serena McCarroll and her partner Tyler Brett moved from Vancouver, B.C. to rural Saskatchewan. They went from living in a city with a population of 578,000 to a hamlet called Dana with a population of about 20. Serena writes of their decision in her MFA thesis paper: “Why would we do such a thing? As visual artists we had grown tired of living month to month in a city that would never allow us the opportunity to own property and/or start our own business (we were mired by student debt and bad credit). We came up with a plan, and that plan was rural Saskatchewan.”

Serena and Tyler set out to create something; they wanted to make a life where they could sustain themselves and their artistic practices. And they wanted to engage people. After two years their dream was realized as an art shop, café, community centre, and music venue, all housed under one roof. Christened “All Citizens,” it sat on the main street of Bruno, Saskatchewan, (population 500) right next door to “Senior Citizens.” Not meaning to offend, the artists were truly interested in dialoguing with the community around them. At the time, Serena had no idea just how important three seniors would become to her own practice.

Serena and Tyler’s instincts were not wrong; historically artists live where others will not because rent is cheaper and they need larger spaces in which to make work and live. However, this usually means artists will live in the rougher neighbourhoods of cities rather than the farthest reaches of a prairie province. Regardless, if all goes well, the artists thrive by having low rent and the space to make their artwork. But what often happens in cities is that the communities and street life that artists beget become so popular and sought after that property values go up and eventually the artists that created that value are priced out. So why create the community if it comes at the cost of affordable housing? Presumably, because artists need housing *and* community.

Having found affordable housing in Bruno, Serena realized she had very few peers there. Most of the women her age

were starting families and just didn't understand Serena's desire to create art and cultivate an artistic community in their town. Enter three women: Bernadette, a farm-poetess;



Bernadette Greuel

Susanna, a gallerist and outsider artist; and Sister Maureen, a nun who repurposed an abandoned convent as an event space, all ranging in age from 76 to 97.

Serena kept a blog during the time she lived in Bruno and described in it how she met Bernadette Greuel on the street one day. Bernadette gave her a business card that announced her occupation as "Farm Poet," and asked if Serena and Tyler could find her some metal rings for the decorative tanning she does the next time they were in Saskatoon. They got her the rings and when Bernadette went to pick them up from Serena at All Citizens, she brought carrots from her garden in

exchange for the favour. Bernadette found Serena, isolated and despairing, in her empty artist's café. She was going for coffee with her friends at the restaurant next door and invited Serena along. Serena soon found herself laughing hysterically with a group of ladies her grandmother's age, while Bernadette recited her funny, clever, even risqué poems. Eventually, the Farm Poetess ended up performing on the stage at All Citizens.



Sister Maureen Maier

Susanna Bauer was a local artist and collector who heard about Serena and Tyler's endeavour with All Citizens in the newspaper and was curious to know more. The couple invited Susanna to their art spot where upon arrival, seemingly unimpressed by what they had on display, she invited them to *her* museum. They went, and were enchanted by Susanna's world.

Susanna's museum contained antiques that related to a lot of local history, as well as her own creations. Susanna's father was a painter, and she proclaimed she was born an artist. She had raised several children—both her own and foster children, and had used art as a way to engage her youngsters with nature, humour, self-discipline, confidence, and creativity. As Serena notes “her creative energy is boundless and her exploration of it without limit.” Serena has wonderful documentation of Susanna and her work. However none of Susanna's varied and precious pieces were ever consigned to the All Citizens art shop.

Sister Maureen Maier attracted the young artists by a hand written sign on the side door to Bruno's largest property that read, “art gallery.” Sister Maureen was the C.E.O. of The Prairie Ursuline Centre, formerly a convent and Catholic boarding school where she had studied as a young girl. She continued to learn, live, and work within the 60,000 square-foot facility for 56 years. By the 1980s the school had closed and all the other nuns had moved on or retired. Determined to keep the building from becoming idle, Sister Maureen re-invented the space as a community centre that accommodated educational programs, retreats, such special events as Bruno's renowned cherry festival, and a small art gallery. Serena came initially for the art gallery, but fell in love with the building. She recalls: “it was incredibly unique, a time capsule brimming with personality, not dissimilar to the woman [Sister Maureen] who saved it.” Serena continued her acquaintance with Sister Maureen by interviewing her about her upbringing

in rural Saskatchewan and her history as a nun, author, and social organizer. She also took pictures of The Prairie Ursuline



Susanna Bauer

Centre and all its glorious visual details. Serena also recounts frequently pulling her truck into the nun's parking lot in order to pick up the centre's WIFI connection—the only one in town—enabling her to write her blog.

While Serena initially moved to Bruno for the possibilities afforded by cheap rent, she was soon confronted with the extreme isolation of rural prairie life—both physical and psychological—and the challenge of maintaining an artistic practice in such a context. Her longing for community came in the form of Bernadette, Susanna, and Sister Maureen, who unexpectedly came into Serena's life as fellow artists/

entrepreneurs, who then became friends and mentors, and eventually the focus of her own artwork, *Three Women*.

Pursuing artistic work with no formal training, the three women forged their own routes for self-expression in a vast and empty place. By revealing something about these artists in relation to the larger community in which they work, Serena's series considers what enables an artist to thrive. Her work raises questions regarding the influences of geography, upbringing, and access to an artistic community, while examining the social fabric underlying Saskatchewan's rural landscape.

The artist would like to thank: Rebecca Baran, Wil Craddock, Hilary Dean, Sébastien Garcia, Sue Johnson, Christopher Lacroix, Blanca Marcela López, Narda McCarroll, and Katy McCormick.

Produced in the Documentary Media (MFA) Program, Ryerson University 2011

Alice Dixon was born in Toronto, Canada and holds a degree in Photographic Studies from Ryerson University. Her artistic experience extends internationally having lived and worked in Paris, France. She is currently the Exhibition Coordinator at Gallery 44.

Serena McCarroll received her BFA degree from the Emily Carr Institute of Art in 2002. Her work has been shown in galleries such as the York Quay Gallery (Toronto), the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, Paved Arts (Saskatoon), The Nickle Arts Museum (Calgary) and TCB Gallery (Melbourne, Australia). In 2007 she co-founded a tiny art-shop / music venue in rural Saskatchewan (alongside fellow artist Tyler Brett) called All Citizens.

From the exhibition:

***Three Women – Photographs by Serena McCarroll
Curated by Alice Dixon***

May 11th–May 28th, 2011

Scotiabank CONTACT Feature Exhibition

I.M.A. Gallery, 80 Spadina Ave. Suite 305, Toronto, ON

I.M.A. Gallery is a non-profit student and faculty-run gallery, providing an exhibition venue for contemporary, Canadian and international film, new media and photography artists. The Gallery is supported by the Projects Funding Allocation Committee (PFACS), Ryerson University's School of Image Arts and generous donations from community and individual partners.

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ISBN: 978-0-9876726-0-5

Typeset in Baskerville and Bembo

2nd Edition

Anchorless Press

Robyn York, Printer & Publisher

1072 Dovercourt Road, Toronto ON

M6H 2X8 Canada

www.anchorlesspress.com

