



HONOURING HER Passions

MAYNE ISLAND ARTIST AND ARTS COUNCIL PRESIDENT DEBORAH STRONG

Story and photos by Cherie Thiessen; artwork images courtesy Deborah Strong

We're sitting outside Deborah Strong's 100-square-foot Yellow Bird Art Studio on Mayne Island after having absorbed the sight and the energy of her compact but efficient creative space, a space she calls "small but mighty."

It reminds me of the saying "good things come in small packages." It also reminds me of why I so love writing about artists, in spite of my lack of education or experience in the craft. Being allowed to enter magical places of creativity like this is such a gift; to actually see where and how artists work, what tools they use and what they're creating, and then to be able to visit and ask questions. So I ask how it all started.

"Drawing has been a lifelong passion for me. As a child I found I could draw and I have continued drawing ever since. I went into a career in graphic design because I was focused on making a living, but in hindsight I should have just pursued a fine arts degree and focused on that. I think it set me back in some ways. My art was just a sideline part time during those working years. Then in my 40s I decided it was time to focus on it. I took the plunge to become a full-time artist."



Above: Tranquil Waters pencil drawing of goldeneye ducks by Deborah Strong.

At top: Strong in her Yellow Bird Art Studio space.

Next page: Coloured pencils in the studio.



Growing up on a small farm, Strong developed an affection for animals and that really comes through in her work. Her passion to create art combined with her deep love for animals comes together well. I fall in love with an image of a blue horse craning its neck to see what's happening, and with the friendly cows in another work, who crowd to the front to see if someone is heading over with food. The cows and horses are imbued with personality and I can't help but smile. I think anyone looking at these animals would feel a strong connection to them.

"I really believe that as artists we have to recognize and honour our passions. If I'm going to make art it has to be about the things that really matter in my life. My affinity with animals has been a lifelong experience, so the two merged."

The artist, who tells me her choice of subjects has shifted somewhat with her concerns about the environmental changes that are happening, says she has been sketching birds more recently.

"We really need to recognize

these little life forms that surround us that we may not be paying too much attention to but are so important to our environment and our ecosystem."

Strong says she's not a painter; coloured pencil has always been her love.

"I like to draw. I like the precision of coloured pencils; they're the classic 'clean,' and they're non-toxic and durable. They're also amazingly versatile."

She also likes the fact that when she works with coloured pencils she can pick up the work, put it down and walk away from it whenever she wants. It can be a work in progress for as long as it needs to be.

These days she is also experimenting with using varnish rather than glass to protect her finished work. She shows me a drawing of an owl as an example.

"I work with a pencil on the clay-coated surface like this and when I am finished I'll protect it with varnish because I don't like putting glass on a work. It takes away from the immediacy of it and becomes a barrier between the work and the viewer."

She also has a soft spot for silk painting, which she took up in her 20s.



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Above: Award-winning Butterflies & Goosebumps drawing.
 Top right: The Talisman (raven).
 Page 33: On the Fence (barred owl).

"I did the two for a very long time and, although I'm focused on coloured pencil right now, I'll come back to silk painting. It's a contrasting medium with the pencil but it also has this drawing element to it."

Originally from South Surrey, she and her late husband used to visit on their bikes and camp out on the Gulf Islands. They fell in love with Mayne Island, especially because it was imbued with Gulf Island charm and it loved them right back. Mayne was also close to the mainland so they could work there and still get back and forth, but yet at the same time it also felt "away."

In September of this year she sold her South Surrey home and made the permanent move to the island. She also put away her touring set-up: the tent, the lighting, "the whole nine yards."

"I toured and toured for several years up and down the island and in the valley," she says.

I counted 14 events at which she had exhibited between 2018 and 2019, including Comox's popular Filberg Festival.

"I feel I can hunker down here, work on my art and invite people in regularly once COVID-19 is over. I may go back to touring, but not right now."

Strong, who has a history of connection to the non-profit sector, felt she needed to get to know the Mayne Island community and get involved, so in 2018 "suddenly I was president of the Southern Gulf Islands Art Council. You put your hand up and this is what happens," she laughs. "It keeps me really busy but it seemed like a natural fit for me to do that."

It's work she enjoys. She tells me about the active Mayne Island branch, which organizes local art exhibitions throughout the year on a monthly basis, mounting group shows in the island's library or the Agricultural Hall. This year the branch organized an Arts on the Islands Southern Gulf Islands Regional Exhibition 2020, expecting it to become an annual event. To accompany it, Strong spearheaded creation of a beautiful catalogue featuring over 60 of the islands' artists. She tells me a little about its history.

"We organized this regional art show this year for the first time in ages and had three excellent exhibition jurors. The original idea was to have an online component, but then along came COVID-19, so online became the focus of it. We collaborated with the Federation of Canadian Artists, who provided the online platform for the show. There was a huge amount of time pulling that together, but I think it resulted in a lovely exhibition and catalogue."

Happily, however, not every art event has gone online. Locals and visitors missing the whole "zen" of a studio and of real encounters with artists can actually go on a physical studio tour on Nov. 13-15, with COVID-19 protocols in place.

Strong, who received prestigious Senior status with the Federation of Canadian Artists in 2018, smiles when I ask her what a typical day is like for her.

"I've only just finished unpacking, so my days are still a bit scrambled. My life has been this evolution over the last few years, but my vision for my day is to be spending a few hours every day in my studio working away, which is how my schedule was before. I would get up in the morning, head to my studio, attend to business and then get to work. It will probably be a few years before I get to settle into that lovely routine again."

So, with building a house, organizing art events, creating more art, and heading up an active arts council network, this artist will continue to be busy for a while yet. However, having been involved in over 50 exhibitions since 1984, she is clearly no stranger to work. She'll do it. ✨

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- To look at the latest information about the Arts on the Islands Regional Exhibition 2020 go to www.artsontheislands.org/online-shows.html. Click on the Arts on Mayne tab. It will be updated with artists' names, profiles, and an online map as well as Covid protocols.
- For information on the November Mayne Studio Tour on November 13-15 visit www.artsontheislands.org/mayne-studio-tour.html
- For travel to Mayne, discounts and packages, visit the BC Ferries site: www.bcferries.com
- To visit Deborah Strong's Yellow Bird Art Studio, call or email the artist to set up an appointment: 250-539-0500 or email strongartart@telus.net. Website: www.strongartart.ca

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