

Unblocking The Scenery

Rose and Rosenwald slash through politics and pandemics with cardboard signs

Art by Gregory Beatty



Journal of the Plague Year(s)

Remai Modern Gallery

Until Feb. 20

Literary-minded readers will recognize the reference to English writer Daniel Defoe's 1722 book in this exhibition by Saskatoon artists Betsy Rosenwald and Dawna Rose. Defoe's journal offers an eyewitness account of life in London during the "Great Plague of 1665", where an estimated one-quarter of London's 400,000 residents died.

Defoe was five when the bubonic plague struck. The journal is believed to be based on his uncle's diary.

Covid-19 is no bubonic plague. Still, we're 30-plus months into the pandemic and over 6.6 million people have died worldwide. There's been plenty of political and economic turmoil too, so the reference is fair.

While Covid's arrival in March 2020 was the initial impetus for the show, the roots go deeper than that, said Rosenwald in an early November phone interview. "Dawna and I have shared a studio for more than 20 years. There was a wall between us, but we've been sharing ideas and talking about what's going on in the world for a long time."

In January 2017, Rose recalls, she and Betsy went to New York City for the Women's March held the day after Donald Trump's inauguration as president.

"We were inspired by the cardboard signs that people were displaying," says Rose. "When I got home, I started to make signs. That was a three-year lag-time between then and the pandemic."

When the COVID lockdown was announced, Rosenwald and Rose bubbled in their studio.

Rosenwald was born in the United States. She moved to Saskatoon in 2000, but as she watched U.S. events unfold at a distance she was dismayed.

"When all of this stuff happened heading into the 2020 election, I identified so much with Americans and felt anger and disbelief at the way Trump and the Republicans were dealing with everything," she says. "That pushed me to start making signs, too."

The pandemic has special meaning for Rosenwald, because in 1956 she and her parents all contracted polio.

"It was just the beginning of the vaccine, and we weren't vaccinated, and that left my mother a quadriplegic," says Rosenwald. "I also lived in New York at the start of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, so those experiences really resonated for me — and not in a great way."

"The narcissistic response of Donald Trump even from the very beginning — not wanting to count case numbers on the cruise ship because it was going to look bad for him — that infected not just American politics, but obviously spread to Canada with the convoy protesters," says Rose.

SIGN LANGUAGE

While Rosenwald and Rose were bubbled, they posted their painted signs online. Their first public showing was at Marie Lannoo's project space 330G in February 2021. The show was by appointment only because of Covid.

The enthusiastic response convinced them they'd struck a chord with people, says Rosenwald.

"They're angry, and they don't have the outlet we have, so they said, 'Thank you, you're expressing what we feel.' That [encouraged] us to go on after the 330G show," she says.

Shortly after that, they lost their studio but ended up being invited to do a year of artist residencies at AKA, Paved and Art Placement in Saskatoon, and Pouch Cove Foundation in Newfoundland.

They also got some Saskatchewan Arts Board funding to expand the scope of their project.

"Art Placement is where we did our first truly collaborative work," says Rosenwald. "We made a wall piece on plastic that was about 35 feet. We created it together, and because it was on plastic it was going to get thrown out. We decided to sell it for \$10 a square foot."

"We thought nobody would really want it, so we'd make about \$200," says Rose. "But we ended up with just one scrap left and made \$3,700, which we donated to Living Sky Wildlife Rehabilitation."

Both Rosenwald and Rose are lifelong newspaper readers who keep a close eye on stuff happening around the world. They read online now and have compiled an archive of stories and images that informs their work.

Climate change, the biodiversity crisis, the rise in misogyny and violence against women and the uprising in Iran are just a few of the non-pandemic topics they've addressed in their signs.

When I spoke with Rose and Rosenwald, they'd yet to finalize the works that would be in the show. They have over 1,000 to choose from. And the way they're executed (as protest signs, or maybe boldly scrawled graffiti) gives them a visceral quality that runs counter to the revisionist narratives about the pandemic and subsequent events (such as comparing the Jan. 6 Capitol riot to a "tourist visit") that extremist groups are pushing these days.

"We're not documentarians, we're artists," says Rose. "It is a subjective response from our place in the world. We're not historians. We couldn't take a step back. But we did choose what was important to us."

"I have a piece called 'Nasty Women Vote' that I did after President Trump called Kamala Harris a nasty woman," says Rosenwald. "Then I thought of all of the names women are called, whether it's strident, stupid, slutty, bossy, and just put them in — like 'Bossy Women Vote', to turn it around and empower women instead of insulting them."

The artists plan to revisit their Art Placement project at Remai Modern, this time on a 60-foot wall lined with cardboard. They'll work on the wall piece through January. They're also producing a book with Remai Modern that will launch (with the wall piece) in February.

They also intend to operate a giant Tampax box as a gift shop. The shop will be "stocked" with paintings of items such as female hygiene products, epidurals and infant formula that have been hit by supply crunches during the pandemic.

"It highlights how those products are in short supply to begin with, because they're made by a small number of manufacturers," says Rose. "Then just in general, women in remote and less well-off areas have trouble getting them. They're heavily taxed and they're expensive, whereas Viagra is free for the U.S. military!"

With all the pressures bearing down on people these days — from anxiety over climate change and the environment to the ongoing pandemic and financial pressures from inflation and higher interest rates — Rosenwald and Rose feel we are in dangerous waters. This is their way of sounding the alarm.

"We have people running in elections now who say they may not certify the results where people have voted unless they like the outcome," says Rosenwald. "Democracy is under attack, not just in America, but worldwide. And the model of authoritarian government that's being promoted is from the supposed bastion of democracy."

"People talk about Jan. 6 and democracy, but my argument would be that absolutely everything that happens in the U.S. ends up here," says Rose. "And we need to be very cognizant of that because it's filtering into our politics, too." ■



STUFF TO DO

GO TO FULL CALENDAR

MUSIC
Half Moon Run
 Tue, Nov 7, 2023

COMMUNITY
Computer Club for Seniors
 Tue, Nov 7, 2023

MUSIC
Moneen
 Wed, Nov 8, 2023

READING
Shifting Gears: Coast to Coast on the Trans Am Bike Race
 Wed, Nov 8, 2023

COMMUNITY
Common Ground
 Wed, Nov 8, 2023

