

Drawing You In

Her work has been called luminous and magical, but it's the emotional undercurrent that pulls you in.

story by Lal Ingram

Australian-born artist Miranda Jones is giving me an informal tour of the Saskatoon home she shares with her husband and children. The house is everything you expect an artist's home to be – eclectic, colourful and filled with interesting things. The artist herself is wearing a vibrant summer shirt in defiance of the bleak mid-winter chill outside and talking easily about her work.

"This one?" she asks, as we stop at a canvas that depicts a penguin seemingly lost in lush greenery. "I painted this after coming to Canada. In retrospect, I realized I was dealing with being an immigrant. I'd lived in Portugal when I was 17 so I knew about culture clash. I just didn't expect to find it when I moved here."

Jones' paintings have been called luminous, imaginative, highly decorative. To someone like me, innocent of school, form or style, they are compelling. I like the penguin in the garden, it makes me smile. The emotional undercurrent – that sense of being the outsider – only occurs to me after.

This ability to draw you into her art – whether a painting, drawing or sculpture – gives Jones' work both its power and its popularity.

"Miranda fans are fanatics," says Susan Whitney, director of the Susan Whitney Gallery in Regina, which has represented Jones for close to 20 years. "What makes her distinctively different, and what she is known for, is the way she uses metallic leaf in her paintings."

The effect is work that seems to generate its own heat. "There's something about living with her work that brings warmth and light into a home," Whitney says. "One of the things I love is how it will change with the different light in the gallery through the day. The word that comes to mind is magical."

Jones takes praise in stride, largely because she's also had her fair share of criticism. While taking her Masters of Fine Art in the late 1980s, she was "studying under mostly modernist teachers who were into minimalism, simplifying and abstraction. It wasn't me. After being very confused and not getting a lot of positive feedback, I decided I would reject everything that my teachers were telling me and try to pack as much pattern and colour and form onto one piece of paper that I could."

We're standing in front of a painting in the family room. It's different than her later works, though just as rich in colour, pattern and detail. This outburst of expression was her response to minimalism. "I was so excited by this," she says, "it was the starting off point for me. I realized that I was very interested in decorative work, in frames within frames, and certain shapes and forms that were part of my background."





Above: A Question of Reverence, photo by Grant Kernan
Below: The Bird Meeting, mixed media on paper, photo by Grant Kernan



Jones began to throw off the influence of her teachers. In an artistic community where simplicity was in, she went the other way. "The nice thing about doing your masters is that you're with your peers more, less with your professors. And you're at a point in your work when you're really trying to find your own voice. You're becoming your own self as an artist."

Her growing sense of self was reinforced during a visit home. "When I stepped off the plane to the heat of Sydney, I just knew I was home. I remember looking out at the orchard and seeing all the fruit trees and thinking, this isn't Saskatchewan. This is the part of me that they will never understand. I can't be them. I wasn't brought up on the prairie. I was brought up in a very flat, open, spacious environment, but it wasn't the prairie."

Jones grew up in Waikerie, a pretty town not far from Adelaide in the heart of South Australia's citrus growing area. It was love that brought her to Saskatchewan. Actually, love and a bit of wanderlust. "I had itchy feet," she smiles, "I wanted adventure." After meeting her future husband in Canberra, she came to Canada with him in 1980. They spent several years in Newfoundland before career opportunities brought them west.

Her career has grown steadily during her years here. She's had nine solo and ten group exhibitions. Her resume includes commissioned works for Parks Canada, illustrating two children's books, *The Floating Orchard* and *Kate Can't Wait* by Tundra Books, and covers for several editions of *Herstory Women's Collective Calendar*. Her work hangs in Canada's Australian Embassy in Sydney, as well as in the collections of the Provincial Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Memorial University in St. John's, Nfld., University of Saskatchewan Department of Agricultural Science, Saskatchewan Arts Board, Mendel Art Galley, City of Regina, Queen Elizabeth II Hospital in Grande Prairie Alberta and more.

Jones has never been afraid to go beyond safe, familiar boundaries, in fact, she considers it essential. "One thing that happens when you show at galleries

is that you tend to build up expectations in your clientele. They see a sort of work they like and keep wanting that sort of thing. But as an artist, you get bored.

You need to break away and change." Change is evident in her work. She works in several mediums, including fabric, painting, drawing and metal. In recent years, metal sculpture has claimed a growing hold on her imagination. "I'm moving from soft to hard," she laughs. "Years ago, I was working in fabric making one-of-a-kind clothing. Now some of the imagery from that time is coming back in my sculpture."



Whatever the medium, her work seems to evoke a response from viewers. Her imagery combines with colour, pattern and shape to convey a sense of movement. When you view her paintings, there's something that catches you like a current and takes you on a journey. Maybe it just makes you smile, maybe it makes you think. But for a few moments, you're somewhere else.

"Art is very powerful. As an artist, you're often working in isolation, struggling to make ends meet and not getting recognized. But there's a more important reason for making art in a society that doesn't always regard it as important, and that's what's in it. The creative process isn't finished once it's in the piece. It's vicarious, it touches something in the viewer."

Jones' work is on display from March 28 to April 10, 2004 at the Darrell Bell Gallery in Saskatoon, and at the Susan Whitney Gallery in Regina. See more online at: www.susanwhitneygallery.com



Right: Chair, photo by Trent Watts
Below Left: Sedna, oil and metallic leaf on paper, photo by Grant Kernan

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