



Bobbie Burgers: Into abstraction

Artist Bobbie Burgers presents her riskiest exhibition yet

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It's a clear, wintry morning in West Vancouver. Seemingly endless blue skies have breathed frost into the undershirts and footwells of hedges while the road glistens with crystals that have yet to realize it's noon.

It's days like these that leave one peering at the tips of trees and through fingers of grass for signs of spring. And, as the natural world falls dormant, a step inside the home of Bobbie Burgers keeps that promise alive.

Burgers, one of Canada's most popular contemporary artists, has mastered the floral. From still life, she pulls flowers through the sieve of time and leaves them deconstructed – raw colour and emotion on canvas. And whether you're drawn to the suggestion of blooms that have yet to unfurl, or see beauty in petals that have just started to drop, depends, much like the artist, on what stage of life you're in.

The oversized front door pivots open and Burgers – six feet of Dutch androgyny, capped by tousled blonde hair reminiscent of the peonies and parrot tulips she paints – steps out into the sunlight.

"I was just making us some cookies," she announces with a smile, gliding quickly back inside and over to the oven.

The house, designed by her brother Cedric, is gallery-like and magazine-featured. Step-

ping over the burbling pond, past the sweeping seaward views and into the entrance, your sight line collides with vast expanses of wall, claimed floor-to-ceiling by Bobbie's work.

There's no sense of chaos in this family home, or even that a studio exists nearby – just clean lines, acrylic flora, and Burgers in her ubiquitous stripes.

Within minutes, the gooey cranberry-chocolate cookies are paired with tea, and she sets them down on the long dining room table next to one of her newest pieces.

Contained for so long to just canvas, Burgers is on the cusp of a new stage in her career, and will be debuting her first forays into sculpture this week at Bau-Xi Gallery on South Granville.

As she talks, her hand flits over occasionally to touch this one – a hefty, gravity-defying assemblage of roughly hewn bronze roses – as if to remind herself that it's real.

Born in 1973 the daughter of Dutch immigrants, Burgers' mother was an interior designer and father a renowned architect. She recalls her '70s upbringing, where road trips were wiled away painting in the back seat of their car and television had yet to become a societal distraction, as idyllic for her pursuits.

After graduating high school, Burgers went to France for a year of study before returning home to take art history at the University of Victoria and attend summer sessions at Emily Carr.

By her mid-20s, Burgers' style – informed by the Dutch masters with an intriguing



Top: Bobbie Burgers at work in her West Vancouver studio. Bottom: Burgers' latest exhibition features a bold yet restrained palette of colours. Kyrani Kanavaros/Klik photos

tension between fear and discovery – had garnered the attention of local curators. In 1999, her first solo show at Diane Farris Gallery sold out.

The next year, Burgers moved to Bau-Xi – the oldest contemporary art gallery in Vancouver – marking the period from which she would go on to prolifically have four to five solo shows a year around the world – each one a sell-out – ever since.

For 20 years, she's transformed the cliché of flowers into forceful statements on age, femininity, impermanence, and the passing of time.

If her energy seems nervous today though, it's for good reason. This new show will be her riskiest yet.

Not content to paint cabbage roses to international acclaim for another two decades, Burgers has quietly been adding mixed-media relief works and free-standing sculpture to her formal practice. With just seven days until the show, yesterday was spent hashing out final details at the bronze foundry.

"There's so much to learn,"

she says. "[But] it's just been ruminating for so long I thought, 'Let's just push it through'... You have to jump off at some point," she laughs.

At 41, this type of risk taking could be seen as inspirational; but, in fact, it was inspired.

Through time spent with her four children as they explored their artistic sides at local pottery studios, Emily Carr classes, and the Vancouver Art Gallery, Burgers says she was reminded of the fearlessness of childhood, leading to her Dec. 11 show, "The Lure of Magical Thinking" – a theory encapsulating the banishment of youthful imagination in favour of the realism and rationality of adulthood, and the importance of inviting it to return.

This letting go of control, this new way of thinking, can be seen in all aspects of her work, from the fact a third party – her husband – was integral in helping her assemble her finished sculptures, to the fact that her paintings have taken on an exciting abstract quality.

"I was just in this long period of teaching myself my

skills," she says. "And then, about five years ago, it was just, like, 'That's it. I can't paint like this anymore', and all the paintings started to blow apart. This door opened and I had all the tools to now express myself almost immediately in any way I wanted to; I just needed to decide what I wanted to do with it.

"It feels like it's on this massive trajectory right now," she continues, "where there's just infinite possibilities. Compared to five years ago where I was like, 'Ugh, if I have to paint one more close-up tulip...' I mean, I loved that period, just at a certain point I thought, 'I can't do it anymore.'"

Her latest works retain that luminescent energy and groundbreaking, undeniable scale that defines her on the contemporary landscape, but they're rougher, more immediate, more demanding of their viewers. They're more monochromatic and less precious, while simultaneously more complex in their creation. They also show more restraint: What would have taken Burgers 30 brush strokes to accomplish 10 years ago, now only takes her one.

"I notice the ability to do one stroke that says a lot," she confirms. "I used to paint with brushes that were the size of my pinky," she says, holding up her finger in mock dismay. "A big one for me would be the size of my thumb. And now I paint with brushes that are up to four inches."

As result, elaborately seeded swirls of paint now rise above the canvas impasto, while drips are left to run down the canvas untouched.

"With painting, there are

consequences for everything that you do. Suddenly you lose focus for a second and there's not an erase button. And there's mess. There's things that happen; things that go on the floor," she says passionately. "I'm trying to keep more and more of those honest things in there. There's drips; yeah, I could totally paint those out. But I love those. That's, like, a super frozen moment.

"Not that you want it to look haphazard," she adds, "but to leave the little breadcrumbs along of, like, there was a human here and they were pouring their heart out onto this canvas. That was actually my hand that went across in that arc," she says, sweeping out from her shoulder. "That's the really beautiful thing about painting."

And though this process, Burgers says she realized it's okay for florals to be her jumping off point into abstraction.

"I don't think a lot of people that first bought my work would have ever looked at the work I will eventually do," she concludes with a smile, her teeth flashing like billboards of contentment. "It's no longer about the florals; it's just about the energy. So yeah, I think I attracted a certain audience, and I might lose a certain audience, but some people are coming along for the ride." **W**

THE LURE OF MAGICAL THINKING

Bobbie Burgers: "The Lure of Magical Thinking" opens Dec. 11. The exhibition runs until Dec. 24 at Bau-Xi Gallery (3045 Granville).