

Utterly Convincing

Visiting Lise Labbé's fieldstone house overlooking the Mille Îles River north of Montreal is like travelling back to a happier, simpler age. Green lawns slope down to the lazy waters; from afar comes the whisper of traffic along the Laurentian Autoroute, no louder than the wind in the tall trees which shade her home and studio. An officious little housedog scampers back and forth, panting with excitement; a glass of cold lemonade waits on the wooden table.

Lise Labbé's painting is as natural as her surroundings. No need for a doctorate in contemporary art to be moved by the bright, compelling images which have touched the collective imagination of thousands of Quebecers – and are increasingly attracting the attention of art lovers and collectors outside the province. Forget the latest theories of post-modernist discourse: her canvasses speak with vibrant immediacy, a direct line to a world that may never have existed- all the while contriving to convince us utterly that it did.

Natural, however, should not be taken to mean "naturalist" Lise Labbe, like any artist worthy of the name, does more than merely depict. Her pictures create a counter reality, reconstructing and rearranging discrete parts of the world, making them truer than memory, more natural in their humanity than could any photograph. The evocative power and vigorous appeal of Labbé's work spring from this peculiar emotional intensity. The plangent whisper of nostalgia, the smile of recognition at the clumsy verve of the back-alley hockey hopefuls or at the awkward grace of the world-be ballerinas we might once have been, the tears which come with the realization that the moment, once fled, can never return – all are inseparable from her own free-flowing emotional makeup, where laughter and tears play across the surface like sun and cloud on slow-moving water.

Lise Labbé paints her memories, distilling the stored experience and observation of an urban childhood in wartime and post-war Montreal. Born home in September, 1939, in the city's Rosemont district, Labbé recalls the quarter where she lived the first fifteen years of her life as a wonderful place to grow up. "I still remember the horse-drawn hot-dog and chips wagon that used to make the rounds of the neighbourhood." She says, in a cascade of bubbling laughter. "We could smell the hot dogs a mile away, even before we could smell the horse ! There were still plenty of horses then; my uncle had a horse and taught us to ride."

Back then, Rosemont still had a touch of the country, with fields and garden plots surrounding the modest houses of workers at Canadian Pacific's Angus Shops and the small businesses, restaurants, grocery stores and gas stations that sprang up to service their needs. Even today, though nothing resembling a farm remains, Rosemont still preserves a touch of the carefree, sleepy atmosphere of a Labbé painting. Gawky kids still scramble down the

laneways after the red-white- and blue rubber balls which stood in for hockey pucks, although there older brothers may be puffing the real thing instead of the chocolate cigarettes she remembers the neighbourhood boys fake-smoking under wrought-iron staircases. But the sheet-metal signs advertising Quebec-made soft-drinks and the old Texaco gas station insignias have long departed, supplanted by the uncaring glare of international plastic. Franchise dépanneurs (convenience stores) have driven out the local corner stores with the swinging screen doors with the Spruce Beer, signs on their push panels. But in Labbé's canvasses the old Rosemont, lovingly immobilized in the glowing amber of memory endures, larger than life.

"It was a wonderful place to grow up," she reminisces. "We weren't rich, but we had fun, plenty of fun." The material poverty of life in wartime was no obstacle to a childhood filled with pleasure – and the indignity that came when the young Lise and her sister entered English school, the only two French-speaking Quebeckers in the entire institution. "It was very tough, we were always getting beaten up by the English, and today, "She laughs an infectious laugh, "I can't really speak perfect English." But the decision to attend school chez les Anglais came from her maternal grandfather Elphège Larrivière and like the voice of a patriarch, had to be obeyed. Larrivière, who lived upstairs as head of the traditional Québécois extended family, was the dominant influence in the young girl's life: "I never did figure out how he managed to us into English school, us Catholics among all the Protestants. But he did. He always was pushing me to do more, to do better."

Better she did, Lise Labbé is a self-taught natural who never had specialized art training, never read any books on the subject. But what she may lack in sophisticated brush technique and academic composition are more than compensated for by the rush of vibrant, full colour and the profusion of telling detail that transforms each of her paintings into a bustling microsm, a slice of life. "It's a unique style" says Terry Koyman of Koyman's Galleries, in Ottawa, who has been showing Labbé's painting for a year. "There's strong demand here in Ottawa for her typically Montreal scenes; the composition appeals to parents, who love the street hockey. Her paintings were popular, right from the start. A perfect example of art speaking for itself."

Breaking into the gallery circuit can be a gut-wrenching experience, as even the most iron-willed artist can testify. Picture Lise Labbé, a naturally retiring, soft-spoken, self taught painter from a social environment more accustomed to women as homemakers or factory works, mastering the resolve to walk through the doors of an art gallery and offer her work. Living in suburban Laval by then, she speant two years staring through the window of a gallery in a local shopping centre before daring to enter. Finally, in 1973, to a chorus of encouragement from friends and family, she walked through the door—accompanied by her mother for moral support – and into a career as an artist.

Call it luck or coincidence, the gallery was owned by Denis Beauchamp, today a prominent figure in the Montreal art world who then ran a string of similar store-fronts in suburban shopping centers. "I was certain he wouldn't take anything" recalls Labbé. Surprise, Beaucahmp purchased a painting – for 20.00\$. "I saw a lot of talent" he says. "She was doing mostly scenes of mothers and children, nudes, things in soft pastel tones. That's what the popular taste was in Quebec back then."

As public taste grew more sophisticated over the last twenty years, her subject matter became more focused on children. Reacting to children is a natural as breathing for Labbé, who acts as a kind of unofficial mom in suburban Boisbriand neighbourhood where she lives and paints. Boys and girls from the surrounding streets will often drop by for small talk, a glass of lemonade and a cookie. "A girl from one street over started coming to see me when she was five years old, now she's 15 and she still drops by. You know, people keep on asking me to paint other things, but me, I stick to my guns. Kids are what I like to do." She laughs "Kids are exciting"

Buyers of originals (which now sell for \$2500.00 for a 36 x 48 inch canvas) or limited edition reproductions seem to agree. When they purchase a Labbé painting they are rediscovering their own childhood, affirms Jacques Tremblay, proprietor of Gallerie Lionel Tremblay at La Malbaie, a resort community overlooking the Saint Lawrence River downstream from Québec City. "People love the variety, but most of all they appreciate the action, the brilliant colors and the little humoristic touches that make a painting come alive."

But the color, action and humour which seem to flow so spontaneously from her canvasses conceal the temperament of a perfectionist and an unerring eye for detail. Paintings begin as charcoal sketches carefully worked, erased and modified until the composition gels, only then are the oils applied. And when the ideas don't come, she confesses with another laugh, "I panic in a big way. One of my biggest fears is to run out of ideas. Then what would I do?" Still, the painterly equivalent of writers block seems an unlikely prospect for Lise Labbé. For beneath the gentle surface of childhood memory hides a near-obsessive determination to master every element of a scene, to enter into it. "When I paint an alley" she says. "I'm in the alley, if I can't do that, the painting wont work"

This quality is what sets Lise Labbé apart from 'naïve' painter, the modern-day primitive. More than sentimental evocations of bygone childhood, her street scenes form a rich visual archive, a catalogue of a disappearing world teetering, like an endangered species, on the brink of extinction. While she draws and paints from memory, it is a memory stimulated by frequent expeditions to the back streets of the old neighbourhood, camera in hand, searching for relics. Poking into out of the way corner stores or scanning the walls of abandoned buildings, she discovers signs adversitings long-vanished products- locally made colas, oatmeal porridge, liniments- each capable of igniting a powder train of recollection, threads of detail in a closely woven fabric of authenticity. For over the back-alley hockey games and over the working0class walk ups and the leaning light poles looms a darkening sky. Soon night will fall, Lise Labbé seems to be saying, and the game, the game we hoped would never end will be over.

Par : Fred A. Reed
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