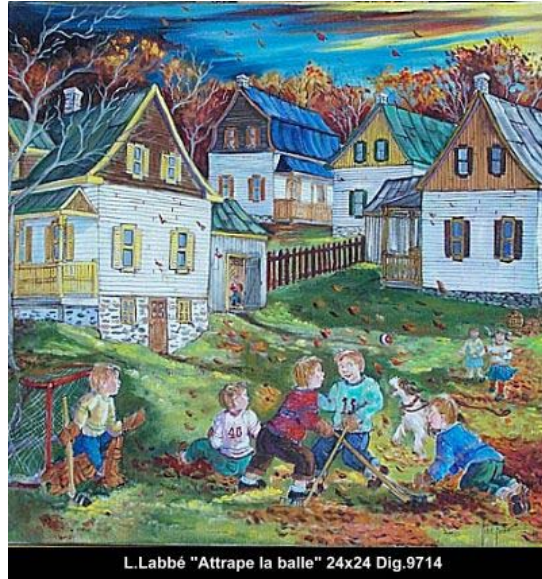


Lise Labbé

Memories of time past

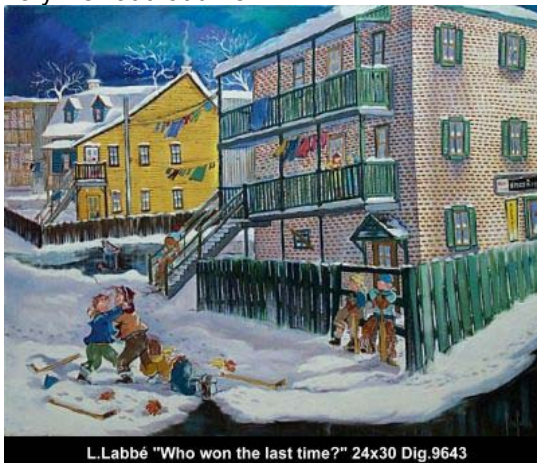
Before I had a chance to get out of my car Lise Labbe was there to welcome me and invite me into her charming country cottage. The property is bordered by a small river that provides a musical backdrop to her quite Laurentian retreat. Labbe is a shy woman who became slightly nervous at the idea of talking about herself. As she talked about her work she began to open up. Labbe was born in the 1940's in the largely francophone working class district of Rosemont in Montreal. The memory of that time and place is firmly embedded in her consciousness. It is a memory that is far from today's reality. "The back lanes were extremely busy and filled with people going about their business: fruit and vegetable peddlers, people who sharpened knives and neighborhood characters. The wash



hanging on the clotheslines flew in the wind and the children ran and played without fear because the laneways belonged to them."

Her father, whom she loved for his kindness and love of life was the owner of a small snack bar where candy was sold by the penny and the clientele came to eat French fries and hot dogs. All of this now provides her with her subject matter.

Labbe's career as an artist came in a round about way. Her grandfather thought that she and her sister should be enrolled in an English school and so they went, the only French children in an English school. Their parents didn't speak English and couldn't help them with their homework. As a result, life became very difficult, especially because the two linguistic groups didn't get along very well at that time.



Not knowing the language, her school work suffered and she quickly turned to drawing and the arts as a consolation prize. "It was the only thing I like in school and it allowed me to survive some difficult years." A high school romance interrupted further study as she married at a very young age. Something she still regrets.

The idea that she might want to do something else with her life than raise a family came to her when her son started kindergarten. Looking for something to do that she loved it came to her that only painting had the power to open any doors for her because it was her only viable talent. She then spent two years painting for her

own pleasure. She explored the world of art and finally summoned up enough spunk to start taking her work to galleries and much to her own surprise she gained representation. "Of all the paintings I took to show them it was one that featured a child in it that they wanted and that decided what and how I would paint."

And now Labbe has made a career of painting children. It is almost as if she still lives among their unrestrained joys and enthusiasms. In her paintings are boys and girls happily playing together in moments of pure joy. Childhood for the artist is almost a sacred temple to which she returns thanks to her painting. "It's a strange phenomenon but when I have a paintbrush in my hand and I start to paint a house it's as if I am starting to really build a house. When I draw children it is as if I am a child again and playing with them."

One result of all this is that as a painter Labbe seems to be able to penetrate and live in a child's world in her work. Already taken somewhere else by her painting she has no need to ever leave her studio. Living in the country allows her the quiet she needs to concentrate on her work and when she considers the fast pace of city life she is more than content to stay in the country and enjoy the quiet solitude of nature.

"I think that television has killed a lot of things and that it's sad to see that children today lose their childhood so quickly." Labbe likes to let her ideas for a painting simmer in the back of her mind before she starts painting and uses photos to prompt her memory. Her themes are always happy because she has known more than her fair share of unhappiness. Especially in her marriage which she finally abandoned leaving behind financial security.



"I want people to smile when they see my paintings. I like funny things and I use a lot of color in my work to provide it with a sense of gaiety." In that way she is like her father who would always play the buffoon to make people laugh.

Rarely satisfied with her work Labbe often takes it back to rework it and frequently has to hide it to prevent herself from working on it again. After trying various techniques and medias Labbe has settled on oils because they dry slowly, giving her plenty of time to change and retouch her work. "If I didn't spend my time erasing things I could certainly paint more than one picture a week," says Labbe.

The artist has suffered from poor health in recent years and has just started to overcome a bacterial infection which threatened to paralyze her left hand. Fortunately she paints with her right. Now she paints in the mornings, using a support to hold up her arm. Unvanquished she still leads her life with her head held high and hasn't lost her capacity to marvel at the wonder of it all, or her ability to laugh. And that sense of wonder is what she likes to provide her public with, that and a reminder of a time when people still had the time to live.