

TRADITIONAL AND TUMULTUOUS



Whisper, 51x61 cm, oil on canvas, 2021.

Kristy Gordon's paintings explore struggle, strength and resilience

by Galadriel Watson

If life has seemed stale during the pandemic, an art exhibition at the Langham Cultural Centre in Kaslo will give viewers plenty of visual stimuli that awaken senses, arouse emotions and provoke thought.

At first glance, the detailed oil paintings by Nelson resident Kristy Gordon, often primarily pastel in colour, bring to mind Renaissance works like Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. At second glance, viewers can see there's a lot more going on than in a usual pretty picture. There is serenity and nature but also ugliness and violence. There are mythical creatures. Gender identity is blurred, and cultural privilege explored. Social systems crack while Mother Earth flourishes. Life can be brutal—and magical.

"The element of struggle ties into a lot of the upheaval that we're going through in the world," says Gordon. "But there's usually a little bit of an element of hope, too, that maybe we're transforming and restructuring things."

It's a message made even timelier during the pandemic. After seven years spent in larger cities, Gordon moved back to her hometown of Nelson in summer 2018, and about a year later received a grant from the Columbia Kootenay Cultural Alliance, funded by Columbia Basin Trust, to create this new body of work. So, while some of the paintings began before the pandemic, a lot of them were born during this difficult time.

Gordon describes her work like this: "There are moments of tenderness between people, highlighting human resilience and mutual cooperation as they attempt to contain an impending disaster."

Viewers, however, shouldn't expect to be able to figure out a specific "story" for each painting. "People like me to try to explain my paintings to them, but they more kind of capture a mood," she says. "I like them to be ambiguous enough that people can read into them in different ways. I find that they speak on lots of different levels."

Grounded in the Kootenays

Born in Vancouver, Gordon moved to Nelson as a baby. She recalls that she first sold a painting, as a teenager, at Nelson's ArtWalk. "It was one of my first shows ever. It was great." That painting has since been bequeathed to the collection of Touchstones Nelson: Museum of Art and History.

After high school, she obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Ontario College of Art and Design and a Master of Fine Arts from the New York Academy of Art. Her paintings have been exhibited internationally and earned numerous awards. They hang in more than 600 collections. And while her last home in New York City was exhilarating, it was too expensive and tiring. She had to teach so much, simply to pay the rent, that she didn't have time to paint.

Her return to Nelson has solved that. "I really have had a lot of time to

focus on this new body of work," she says, adding that she finally feels like she's found her "voice." "It's nice that, as artists, we can actually live where we want. It has worked out really well. I do feel lucky."

She recently donated a painting to Touchstones as part of a fundraiser, continues to teach art (currently online) and is excited about the show at the Langham. "This will be the first time I've had a solo show in the region of my hometown."

Room for spontaneity

Some locals may even recognize themselves in her paintings. That's because she has friends pose for her—live or in photographs—to refer to as she creates her works.

While posing in her studio, these friends are also among the few people who might get a chance to peek at a painting before it's finished. "I really need to protect my creative process and focus on what I want to paint," she says, "and not get a whole lot of external feedback that could sway me."



Planetary triptych, centre panel of 41x51 cm and side panels of 25x51 cm, oil on canvas, 2021.
Photos courtesy Kristy Gordon

For while Gordon does do some preparatory drawings, she doesn't meticulously plan each painting before the brushstrokes begin. "I really can't work that way," she says. "I've discovered that my process is pretty intuitive. I sort of start somewhere and start with something, and then I follow any nudges and inclinations I get about what to add or to change, and so it develops over time and it reveals itself to me in that way."

A larger painting—the biggest in the Langham show is 1.5 by 2.4 metres and the smallest 25 by 50 centimetres—could take three years, working on and off. "Sometimes I don't know what to do to a painting and it hasn't revealed itself to me, so it can sit for long time until I figure out what to do next."

The end results are intricate, inventive and intriguing.

As health regulations allow, the Langham Cultural Centre in Kaslo is exhibiting Kristy Gordon's new works from April 9 to June 6, 2021. Learn more at kristygordon.com and thelangham.ca.