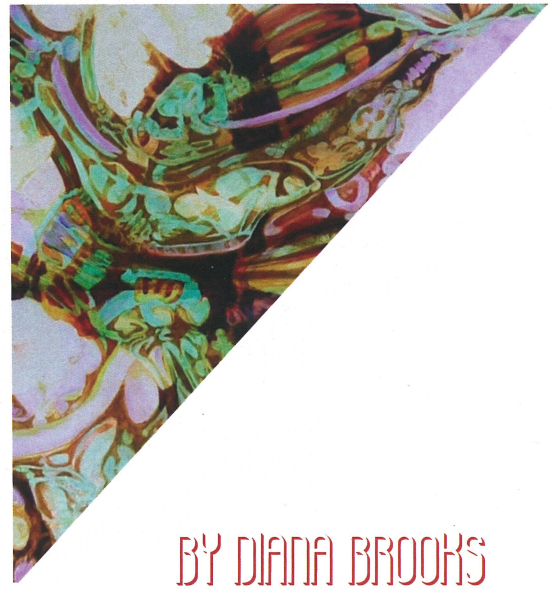
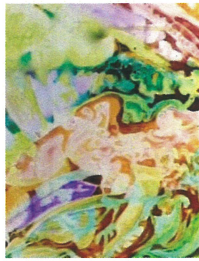
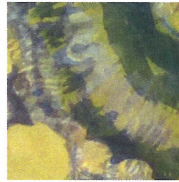
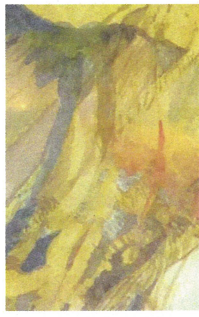


A CONTINUUM OF COMMUNITY ART



Diana Brooks is a visual artist and gallery educator in Victoria, British Columbia. She is a strong advocate of public art.



BY DIANA BROOKS

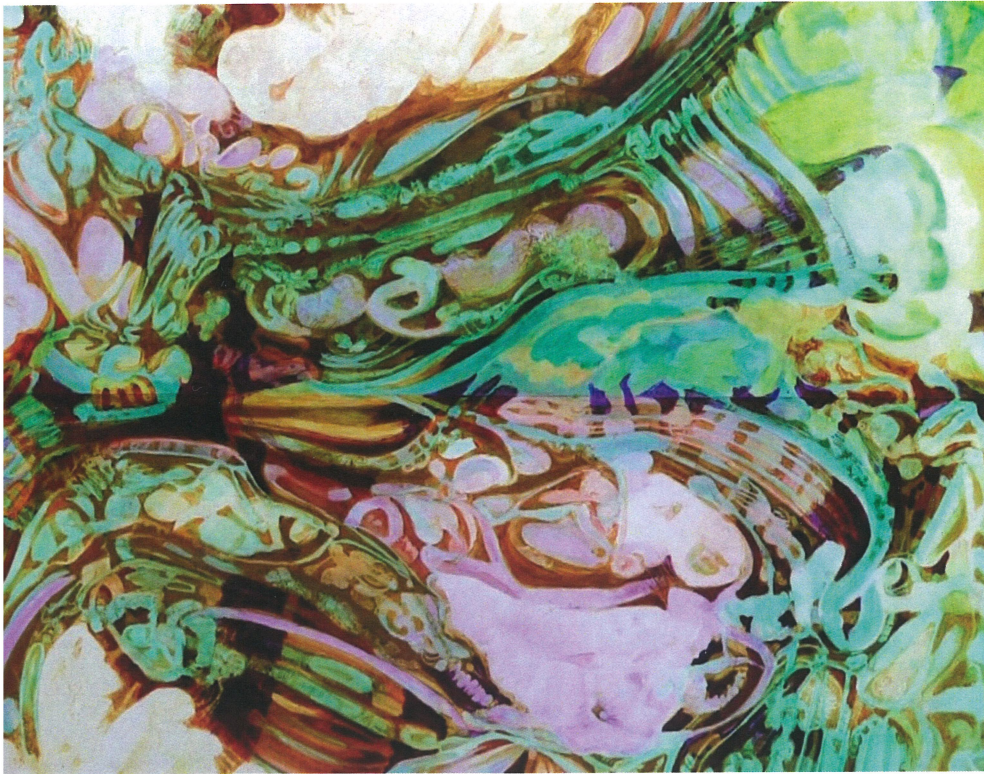
INTRODUCTION

Having enjoyed a professional life that included designing and programming a large interactive education gallery for the Art Gallery of Ontario, chairing the Open Space artist-run centre, and managing the Education Department at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, I have always been committed to furthering the cause of making art accessible to a variety of audiences. What follows is the description of a personal artmaking project that is a continuation of sharing my experiences with my community.

IN THE BEGINNING

A love affair with materials and tools is a good starting point for any artist. The sculptor who falls in love with marble, or the painter who falls in love with watercolour, each shares a passion for their chosen medium. How and why that passion develops is one of the more beautiful mysteries of life. I can remember a very early experience of painting where the mixing, blending and application of colours was hypnotic and unforgettable.

To this day, I share the same passion for painting and exploring non-traditional techniques of paint application. I'm obsessed by big questions: Are there rules I must follow? How can I preserve spontaneity and personal expression while fending off the expectations of a commercial marketplace that insists I do things in a certain way? After committing to the need for spontaneity and improvisation, I began to investigate materials that would respond to my needs.



This Page Left: **Figure 2A**
Right: **Figure 1**

DISCOVERIES and DEVELOPMENTS

Wanting to explore free, gestural strokes and a calligraphic style, I used mulberry paper spread out on the floor and applied acrylic inks with a variety of brushes; the resulting imagery was not so much defined as discovered. Perhaps the best way to characterize what I was attempting to accomplish falls under the tenants of *automatism*, that is to say having no plan or image in mind except what emerged through spontaneous expressive painting. At first this process seemed unstable and chaotic but gradually it felt comfortable and less 'rule bound' by the formalities of art (Figure 1)

The process of working freely was immensely enjoyable. Mulberry paper has a tendency to be absorbent and so

eventually there was a need to exert some control during the applications. However, I discovered mulberry paper had limitations and this led me to explore other paint surfaces where the paint could be layered. I also felt that a more durable paint surface would be an advantage. It wasn't long before I shifted to acrylic paint applied to mylar. As a ground, it is a smooth and responsive material, sensitive to the slightest touch of paint, while being virtually indestructible. When used with acrylic paint, the bond between the paint and the ground becomes permanent. Indeed, one could expose mylar surfaces with acrylic to all kinds of weather and the only real damage would be fading over a long period of exposure to intense light (Figure 2A, 2B, 2C)

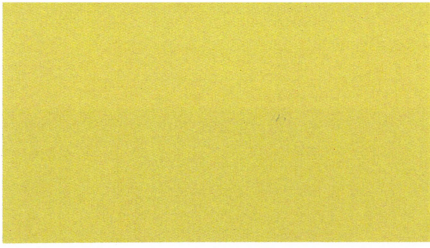
Thus began a love affair to paint and



Opposite Page Left:
Figure 2B and 2C
Right: **Figure 3**

paint and paint. The intention behind the 6 x 21 feet of running mylar I called *Continuum* represents spontaneity of spirit, liberation from expectation, and a full engagement with possibilities. It also represents a subversive act in a world where imagery is often considered synonymous with representation. There is always a need to liberate oneself from expectations and engage in radical exercises of self-expression. *Continuum* is an extravaganza of form and colour, passages that morph and undulate, images that evoke 'froth and spume', layers of colour that suggest crystalline beauty. The densely tangled root forms, open petals and a variety of organic shapes were something to behold (Figure 3).

Faced with a project that was growing



like 'Topsy' and prompted by Banksy's call to take back our public spaces, I considered ways to display my work in a public place. I wanted to find a non-traditional exhibition space. Recognizing the artwork would be best displayed on backlit windows in a storefront at night, I began a search for a storefront. Anyone willing to host my artwork must have available storefront space at street level. Could this be as easy as picking up the phone or going door-to-door for solicitation? After several contacts with local realtors (who were exceptionally supportive of the project) I found a storefront owner willing to accept the piece as an installation in late 2016. Located at the corner of a well-traveled street and extending over the month of December, *Continuum* provided a unique addition to the holiday lights traditionally associated with that time of year. It was particularly satisfying to know I was reaching a broad spectrum of the public with my illuminated project (Figure 4A-E).





Top Left: Figures 4A to 4E

Top Right and Opposite Page: Figures 5A to 5C

REACHING A NEW AUDIENCE

Working for many years in public art galleries, I realized that as educators, we engage in the study of interpretation, hoping to make meaning in a direct way that invites response. This differs from the tradition where a curator positions objects in a gallery case. The interpretation and appreciation of art must be a democratic process; we embrace its multiple meanings in order to understand fundamental aspects of its power to engage the human psyche. The ongoing quest of public art galleries to find “new” audiences relies on bringing the uninitiated to its doors to experience art first hand. The quest of public art galleries is to continually

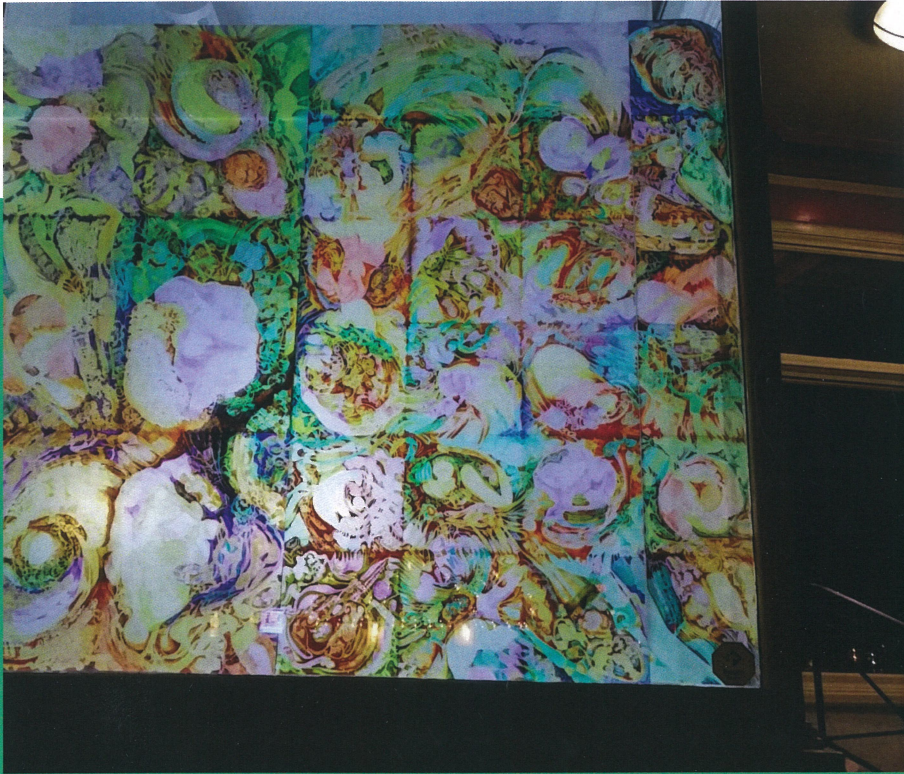
strive for new ways to interact with the community. However, my intention with the *Continuum* project was to reach an audience that was not *traditional* gallery-goers (Figure 5A to 5C).

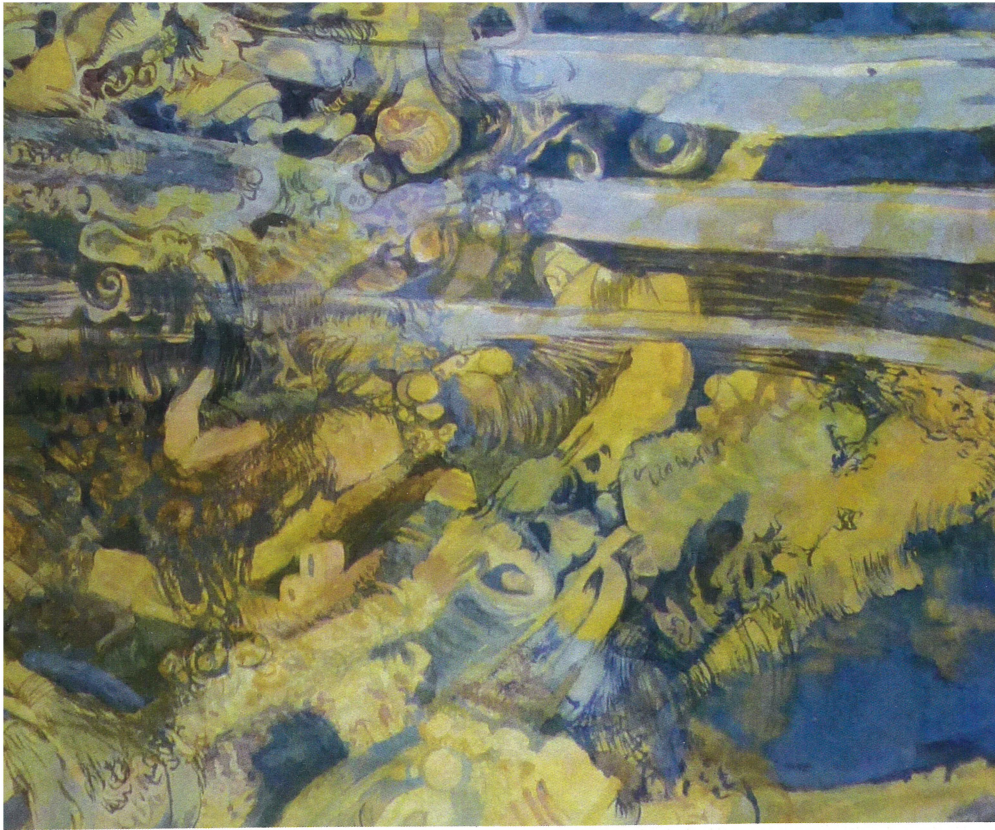
It is worth noting that much contemporary art begins outside formal exhibition spaces. That is why the impact of artists such as Banksy (see Boston University Ethan Dubois article at www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/pastissues/issue-3/dubois/), who set out to reclaim public spaces with their personal vision, call on us to see how urban environments have been usurped and degraded for commercial interests. Or why educator Ali Abdulrahman (see journalist Faisal Irshaid article at: bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38768092), working in Baghdad, Iraq with volunteer university students) to re-purpose the barriers strewn across the city (a reminder of security measures implemented in 2007) by painting them with messages of peace), has had a real

impact in resurrecting desolate urban areas through the power of art. Both Banksy and Abdulrahman are operating outside the sphere of the elite club of art. Both have an enormous impact on their communities.

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

The characteristic translucency of mylar makes it well suited for backlighting in a variety of situations, and given the amazing advances in lighting systems, illuminative artwork can be very economical. It is relatively easy to find school windows to install mylar art that is back-lit, especially over a holiday period. The resulting lantern-like glow





Above: Figure 6

makes a powerful lighting statement. An off-site storefront is another step in moving art from the school to the community. A more challenging project is building a running fence of mylar (shades of Christo) in order to create mazes or walkways. This more ambitious undertaking would be contingent on finding adequate support structures and an available space such as a field. However, within the classroom, students in the early grades would enjoy the 'mylar lighting' experience with projected light turning an entire wall into a single 'painting'. Such a shift in scale and projected light can be extended to create added excitement with the involvement of human drama as students dance through the colours (Figure 6).

USING SCREEN TECHNOLOGY

On my Continuum project, I was working with a palette of five high key acrylic colours. It became immediately

apparent that smaller pieces of mylar could be joined, almost seamlessly, to create a larger work. In fact, the first panel was made entirely from 12-inch squares 'quilted' together. This activity readily invites collaborative work, especially if the project begins with a simple invitation to 'doodle' without concern for representation. If each participant is given the same palette, the resulting work have a greater chance of relating to one another and therefore a composite installation is possible with 20-30 individual works. Indeed, further compositions are possible with a computer home page displaying thumbnails of individually painted mylar works. Each participant could then be asked to design a single composition using all the thumbnails. The resulting compositions could subsequently be voted on and the winner's creation installed as a work of public art, or posted online. Given the advances in printing, original paintings could be returned to participants and the composite work handed out as a signed, original edition. Furthermore, online editions make it possible to create national or international exhibitions that are distributed to other schools or even art galleries.

CONCLUSION

It is worth noting we are often subject to the influences of someone else's vision or style rather than developing our own. This poses a dilemma that may curtail experimentation and finding our own way in developing individual expression and uniqueness. As we stride into the 21st century, we must constantly reassess and challenge outmoded systems because this is an identifiable pattern in the history of art. It is timely to consider how art can be inserted more directly into our communities. It is also timely that there be more discourse about art engaging people and the community in a more direct way. Yes it's time to take back public spaces, reach new audiences, and revitalize everyone's expectation about what art is and can be. And have some fun along the way.