EMILY CARR AND CREATIVE ART JOURNALS

by Diana Brooks

Introduction: Why Art Journals?

From Leonardo's notebooks to Vincent Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo, writings by artists about their personal life and studio ideas represent some of the most important resources regarding the creative process. Emily Carr has added immeasurably both to the world of visual art and literature with her ideas and one book in particular, the journal she purchased on Lawren Harris's advice, offers an unprecedented glimpse into her creative process. As she wrote in her book, *Hundreds and Thousands* (Carr, 2006), "trying to find equivalents for things in words helps me find equivalents in painting. That is the reason for this journal. Everything is all connected up" (p. 46).

I will refer to '*Hundreds and Thousands*' throughout this article as an excellent example of the art journal process and the kind of creative activity that should be encouraged with students as they explore and develop their artistic ideas. In this regard, the British Columbia Ministry of Education guidelines recognize the importance of perceiving and responding to artwork, which includes observing, reflecting on, describing, analyzing, interpreting and evaluating art images.

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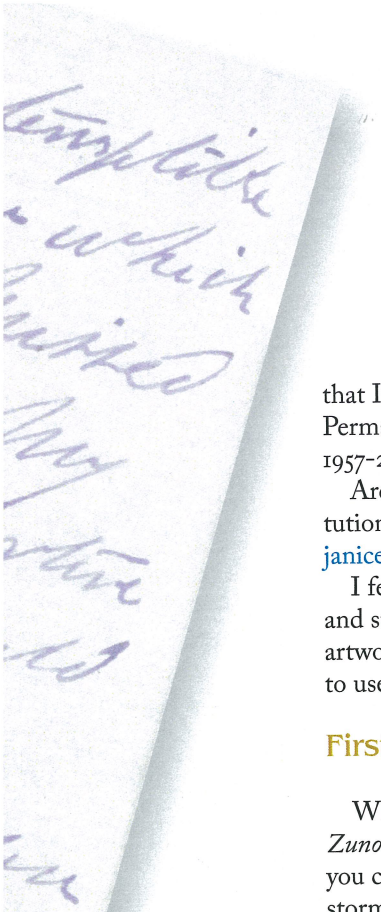
Art Writing and Art Journaling

Let me take a moment here to distinguish between a notebook which expresses an artist's thoughts and struggles regarding their medium in written form, as opposed to the concept of 'art journaling'. Janice Lowry is perhaps the best exemplar of the latter, and it is with interest



that I note her recent inclusion in the Smithsonian Permanent Collection (see: Janice Lowry papers, 1957-2009.

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution at https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/janice-lowry-papers-13665).

I feel Lowry's work goes far beyond 'thoughts and struggles' as she uses writing to stimulate her artwork. The focus of this article is to consider how to use one discipline to inspire the other.

First Project

While viewing a reproduction of Carr's work *Zunoqua of the Cat Village* 1931 (see VAG website), you can read her words and then encourage a brainstorming session to add to it; what other adjectives or even invented words can students come up with? Encourage exaggeration and colourful language.

> Carr wrote in her journal for February 1, 1931:
> "I worked all afternoon ... D'Sonoqua on the house post up in the burnt part, straggled round by undergrowth. I want the pole vague and the tangle of growth strenuous. I want the ferocious, strangled lonesomeness of that place, creepy, nervy, forsaken, dank, dirty dilapidated, the rank smell of nettles and rotting wood, the lush greens of rank sea grass and the overgrown bushes, and the great dense forest behind full of unseen things and great silence, and on the sea the sun beating down, and on the sand, everywhere circling me, that army of cats, purring and rubbing, following my every footstep. That was some place! There was a power behind it all, and stark reality" (p. 50).

Following this introduction, you might choose another image with a strong visceral quality to which students can respond. Prepare by dividing the image into squares and photocopying each component piece, making enough copies for students to work with a partner. Then hand each student partnership a single component without having shown the entire work, and instruct them to describe what they see and imagine using the most descriptive language possible. The resulting short paragraph should be submitted at the end of class. This is a fun way for students to experience the impact that highly descriptive writing can have on the creative process; it should be uncensored as much as possible, an easy introduction to the evocative power of words in the pursuit of visual imagery.

In this introductory session, the class will see the entire work for the first time. Descriptive passages can be read in any order, with students identifying which section of the artwork is associated with a particular passage of writing. Allow time for students to consider the description, and if necessary, read twice. This could also be submitted in writing to enable an evaluation of individual visual acuity

Hundreds and Thousands: A Look at Emily

Carr's journal, *Hundreds and Thousands*, records a critical decade from 1930 to 1940, where she let go of her life's commitment to documenting the 'Indian motif' in order to explore new artistic territory, a process she referred to as "hunting with the heart". Investigating the abstract quality of her artwork through the lens of both Lawren Harris and Mark Tobey and finally moving into her mature sea and sky paintings, we witness an incredible journey of the spirit – empowered in no small measure by her commitment to "word" we can appreciate her struggle to clarify her intentions. *Hundreds and Thousands* affords us a privileged glimpse into the challenges, frustrations and satisfactions of an artist's life. Her example reveals the importance of writing, a process that helped her to recognize the final theme of her mature style, resulting in some of the most compelling images in the history of Canadian art.

> November 23, 1930
> "Yesterday I went to town and bought this book to enter scraps in, not a diary of statistics ... but just to jot me down in, unvarnished me ... It seems to me it helps to write things and thoughts down. It makes the unworthy ones

look more shame-faced and helps to place the better ones for sure in our minds ... and I want my thoughts clear and straight for work" (p. 43).

It's worth noting that she refers to the "unvarnished me", indicating that an open attitude is necessary to bring inner thoughts to light. To call the process non-judgemental, as some might, would be a mistake. The purpose of such writing is to analyze, or deconstruct intention to the point where it can be rebuilt on a more conscious foundation. A similar approach is necessary for students to freely explore personal directions in their own work, both in words and in images, and to analyze their results in an critical and constructive manner, in order to determine how best to develop their imagery. It doesn't take long for any student of art to understand that uncertainty is the natural territory of artistic expression, and any tool that can facilitate understanding should be engaged, especially writing. By admitting to confusion, the clouds begin to disperse and by paying attention, intentions begin to clarify themselves.

January 12, 1931
"My aims are changing and I feel lost and perplexed. I've been to the woods today. It's there but I can't catch hold" (p.48).

June 17, 1931

"I am always asking myself the question. What is it you are struggling for? What is that vital thing the woods contain, possess, that you want? Why do you go back and back to the woods unsatisfied, longing to express something that is there and not able to find it? This I know, I shall not find it until it comes out of my inner self …" (p.54)

Following her example, we realize that real growth in any field involves investigation of new territory, and such research involves observation, description and analysis. Writing helped Carr to recognize certain aspects of the natural world that eluded her in painting, and after many years of stifling her creativity until her first heart attack that precluded strenuous activity, Carr used her journal to describe both her intentions and her process in a continuing excavation of 'unifying principles'.

January 27, 1933

"Empty yourself, come to the day's work free, open, with no preconceived ideas, no set rule of action, open and willing to be led, receptive and obedient, calm and still, unhurried and unworried over the outcome, only sincere and alert for promptings. Cast out the personal, strive for the spiritual in your painting ... You yourself are nothing, only a channel for the pouring through of that which is something, which is all. Your job is to keep that channel clear and clean and pure so that which passes through may be unobstructed, unsullied, undiluted and thus show forth its clear purity and intention. Strive for this thing, for the stillness that should make it possible ... Learn by listening attentively, be aware of your aliveness, alert to promptings" (p. 60).

September of 1935:

"Sketching in the big woods is wonderful. You go, find a space wide enough to sit in and clear enough so that the undergrowth is not drowning you. Then, being elderly,

you spread your camp stool and sit and look round. 'Don't see much here.' 'Wait.' Out comes a cigarette. The mosquitos back away from the smoke. Everything is green. Everything is waiting and still. Slowly things begin to move, to slip into their places. Groups and masses and lines tie themselves together. Colours you had not noticed come out, timidly or boldly. In and out, in and out your eye passes. Nothing is crowded; there is living space for all. Air moves between each leaf. Sunlight plays and dances. Nothing is still now. Life is sweeping through the spaces. Everything is alive. The air is alive. The silence is full of sound. The green is full of colour. Light and dark chase each other. Here is a picture, a complete thought, and there another and there ..." (p. 264).

By 1934, Carr realized that through the tandem operation of writing and painting, the fundamental essence she was attempting to capture was *movement*. She was painting every chance she could. Using manila paper and gasoline-thinned paints facilitated a more calligraphic and improvisational approach; she was creating some of the most important images of her career. Her adoption of a less expensive medium had a profoundly liberating effect on her working process, and could be attributed to a need she recognized through her writing that she was striving to capture something fluid and ephemeral.

October 9, 1933

"Direction, that's what I'm after, everything moving together, relative movement, sympathetic movement, connected movement, flowing, liquid, universal movement, all directions summing up in one grand direction, leading the eye forward ..." (p.100).

April 4, 1934

"I woke this morning with 'unity of movement' in a picture strong in my mind. I believe that van Gogh had that idea. I did not realize he had striven for that till quite recently so I did not come by the idea through him. It seems to me that clears up a lot. I see it very strongly out on the beach and cliffs ... For long I have been trying to get these movements of the parts. Now I see there is only movement. It sways and ripples. It may be slow or fast but it is only one movement sweeping out into space but always keeping going – rocks, sea, sky, one continuous movement" (p.154).

Of note is how Carr continuously strove to evolve imagery, choosing the medium best suited to her elusive subject, and she explored a variety of media to find what best captured her vision. By loosening her working method dramatically from her early days when she did a painstaking under-drawing and would then carefully apply her paint on top, now she was looking for an alla prima application that would facilitate the easy flow of her calligraphic stroke.

March 26, 1934

"Am working intensively this week. I make a sketch one quarter size, loose-knit and superficial but observed, bring it home and make a full-sheet one (oil on paper). I try to take it further than the small one and express all I know of that particular theme and the purpose of the sketch to wake and enter the place of it. What I am struggling most for is movement and expanse – liveness" (p.151).

April 5, 1934

"I am trying chalks. Hang! Why don't they invent a good sketching material? My oil and paper are fine, but the oil paints are such a nuisance to carry. But it's a dandy method for five finger exercises in the studio. I've learned heaps in the paper oils - freedom and direction. You are so unafraid to slash away because material scarcely counts. You use just can paint and there's no loss with failures. I try to do one almost every day. I make a sketch in the evening and a large paper sketch the following morning - or vice versa" (p.154).

Additional Student Projects

An exploration of new media by students could be encouraged by prompting them to go and buy a single tool/ medium at their local art supply store (under $10), and to create any image that showcases its utility. A time limit of one hour to create a sketch will help to curtail "performance anxiety" by assuring students that this is a simple fishing trip – they don't have to catch a whale but they may catch a glimpse of something of value. A class presentation could then follow with students given

a few minutes each to speak about what attracted them to choose as they did, and what they think of their results. Listen for any language that indicates a predilection towards an underlying theme (flexibility, tactility, amorphous quality, colour), and ask for two or three sentences that describe why they find that idea appealing. The goal here is to explore new territory. Results are more important for what they reveal about new directions or underlying motivations rather than a polished appearance.

More Creative Inspiration from Carr Journals

June 12, 1935 - In the Caravan at Albert Head

"Many things need clearing up in my mind so I'd better try to write them out. I figure that a picture equals a movement in space ... The idea must run through the whole, the story that arrested you and urged the desire to express it ... Great care should be taken in the articulation of one movement into another so that the eye swings through the whole canvas with a continuous movement and does not find jerky stops, though it may be bucked occasionally with quick little turns to accelerate the motion of certain places" (p. 254).

September 23, 1936

"I painted well today, working on the summer sketches, reliving them – loving them. I think I have gone further this year, have lifted a little. I see things more as a whole, a little more complete. I am always watching for fear of getting feeble and passe in my work. I don't want to trickle out. I want to pour until the pail is empty, the last bit going out in a gush, not in drops" (p.351)

Emily did not "trickle out"; instead the writing she had used so effectively to clarify her intentions regarding painting, became the vehicle to bring public recognition and acclaim. In early 1937, after her first heart attack and on being told she could no longer paint as before, she instead picked up her pen and began writing about her early adventures in First Nations communities. Klee Wyck (her Indigenous name) signalled a powerful new creative phase for her; it grew to a total of twenty-one stories published in 1941, just as she turned seventy. With those stories, she won the Governor General's Award for Literature that year.

What Can Be Learned from Carr's Ideas?

Emily Carr was without question a lifelong learner. From her early student days in San Francisco (1889-92), to her challenging years in London (1900-05), to the trip to learn what the "new art" was about in France (1910-11), she embraced any medium and any technique that furthered her vision and empowered her perceptions. The use of writing to deepen perception and intensify sensitivity became the tool of her later years, enabling her to capture a profound essence of landscape that would be challenging to teach. The importance of such a tool can only be understood with practice, and the more tools and practice we can give our students, the more creative and versatile they can become.

Carr's approach to writing on art reveals some fundamental principles that may help students; the fact that she never intended to publish her journal gives us a very privileged glimpse into her candid and free writing style. She enjoyed wildly descriptive language, and didn't concern herself with grammar, punctuation, or spelling. Anything that inhibited the easy flow of her expression was bypassed as being irrelevant. Her honesty is a tougher quality to match, and her courage to give up everything she knew at the age of sixty in order to push the boundaries of her work is something few of us could match. However, encouragement and practice enables students to get to the essence of their thoughts; whatever compels them or supports the pursuit of that which eludes them. By

encouraging observation, description and analysis we can facilitate the integrity and courage it takes to truly "hunt with the heart".

A Final Project

Take students out of the classroom onto the school grounds and ask them to choose any place to sit and write about what they see – language to be freely associative, descriptive, visceral and fun. Their short paragraphs are then signed and submitted at the end of the class. Next session, hand out unidentified copies to other students to use as inspiration for an artwork, their resulting images to be submitted at the end of class. In a final session, return written work to the original authors and have students create a work predicated on their memory of the location that inspired the writing, using their own words as inspiration. A final exhibition could feature each written label hung together with two works inspired by it. Class viewing might involve smaller group discussions that consider questions such as: How do the two associated works compare to the writing? Are there any similarities between works done with writing only as inspiration? Which seems stronger, the writing or the images?

Final Word from Emily

October 22, 1936

"The whole difficulty seems to be in getting the thoughts clear enough, making them stand still long enough to be fitted with words and paint. They are so elusive, like wild birds singing above your head, twittering close beside you, chortling in front of you, but gone the moment you put out a hand. If you ever do catch hold of a piece of thought it breaks away leaving the piece in your hand just to aggravate you. If one could only enclose the whole, corral it, enclose it safe, but then maybe it would die and dwindle away because it could not go on growing. I don't think thoughts could stand still. The fringes of them would always be tangling into something just a little further on and that would draw it out and out. I guess that is just why it is so difficult to catch a complete idea. It's because everything is always on the move, always expanding" (p. 355).

Summary

There are many things to be learned from Emily Carr's writing regarding her thoughts and creative process. She has contributed immensely to our understanding and appreciation of the art of journaling and linking ideas with the making of art, perhaps more than any artist of her time. Students should be encouraged to explore the writings of Carr because she was a prolific, award winning author who is still popular to this day. ■

References

Carr, E, (2006). *Hundreds and thousands*. Vancouver, BC: Douglas and McIntyre.