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Bare art

A bequest of drawings, paintings and costumes reveal the artistic process of former Visual Arts professor Colette Urban

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The late Colette Urban, former Western Visual Arts professor and bequest donor, in costume in the video production of the performance of "Bare" in 2008. Photo courtesy of Katherine Knight.

A velvet bear head. A wide-brimmed hat adorned with artificial flowers and twigs. A dress affixed with a multitude of post-consumer waste.

These are the unique, intricate and often bizarre costumes the late Colette Urban, former professor of Visual Arts at Western University, adopted in her preferred form of art — performance.

In performance art, the artist's medium is the body and the live actions he or she performs are the work of art. Prior to her passing from cancer in the summer of 2013, Ms. Urban was recognized as one of a very small handful of active and influential female performance artists in Canada.

Recently, Western University's McIntosh Gallery was the beneficiary of

39 works of art by Ms. Urban.

"It was a special honour when Colette approached us about her gift to the gallery," says McIntosh Gallery Director, James Patten. "She wanted these works to come to Western. They are a real contribution to the community and an invaluable documentation of the art practice of a renowned Canadian performance artist and former Western faculty member."

The majority of the artwork is drawings, sketches and paintings that outline Ms. Urban's ideas for performances, as well as a few physical costumes and props — including the bear costume from the 2008 performance of *Bare* and props for the 2001 performance of *Aqualure* that involved a canoe trip on the Thames River in London, Ont.

"The drawings offer insight into Colette's working method toward performance art. You can tell the sketches are at a stage where her ideas are fluid and experimental," says Patten.

Described by her former colleagues and friends as a shy, soft-spoken woman with a wry and somewhat absurd sense of humour, Ms. Urban used performance as a medium for commentary on women's issues, consumerism and the Canadian experience, among other topics.

"Colette was extremely funny in a quiet kind of way," says Melanie Townsend, BA'91, head of exhibitions and collections at Museum London, who mounted a retrospective exhibition of Ms. Urban's work, *Incognito*, in 2013. "In many ways she was atypical as a performance artist — she didn't have that big personality or the need to be the centre of attention. And yet, it seems so obvious that she became one. Performance was her opportunity to disguise herself and connect with audiences."

As a Visual Arts professor for 11 years at Western, Ms. Urban was seen as a caring, quirky and challenging mentor to her students. She refused to be boxed in by the classroom and lecture format of teaching, preferring to take her students on field trips to second-hand stores to collect items for art.

"Colette liked for her students to learn and come to an understanding of possibilities through doing and experiencing. Her teaching was immersive and experiential, certainly not only theoretical," says former colleague and friend Patrick Mahon, Western Visual Arts faculty member. "She really wanted her students to question their own assumptions — about art, life and, really, our place in the world. She became an advocate, in particular, for her female students."



A Colette Urban drawing that illustrates her vision for the performance of "Bare."

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In 2007, Ms. Urban fulfilled her dream of living as an artist by quitting her tenure-track position and making the bold move to Newfoundland to establish Full Tilt, an artist retreat and exhibition venue in rural McIvers. There, Ms. Urban conceived of several of her performances and hosted artists from around the world.

“Colette was fully an artist — in her whole life. She was also an adventurer. While some were shocked she took such a risk by moving to Newfoundland, it made sense,” says Mahon. “It opened up a period of her life where she was free to explore and be who she wanted to be.”

In a few years, it is expected the McIntosh Gallery will mount an exhibition of Ms. Urban’s drawings. In the meantime, examples of her work can be viewed at her website: www.coletteurban.com

The McIntosh Gallery is a Western Universitybased public art gallery since its establishment in 1942. The gallery collaborates with artists, curators and academics to develop innovative strategies to interpret and disseminate visual culture.

To learn how to leave a gift or bequest of art to the McIntosh Gallery, please contact Gallery Director James Patten (519-661-2111, ext. 84602 or jpatten2@uwo.ca).

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