

An Artist and Her Work, by Abe Massik (excerpt)

What do a Quebecois immigrant and a rural Zambian villager have in common? More than you'd think, especially within the symbolism of "Woman's Work" by my mother, Suzanne Joyal. At first glance all you see is the sunset because of its beautiful blend of colors, but as you look at the piece as a whole, it becomes more and more united. And knowing the history behind it, you can truly see the role of each little piece in conveying the story, or rather both stories. Through "Woman's Work" mom not only creates a beautiful and unique painting, but also tells two intertwined stories of those close to her.

The first noticed the sunset. It rests near the top of the page, dead center. It's colors are carefully blended from a deep blue of the night sky to the sweltering yellow of the African sun, stopping in all shades of pink, purple, and orange along the way. There's a small mud and straw hut perched in front of the sun to protect the viewer from its dazzling brightness. This hut, along with a soft green acacia tree canopy on the horizon and the dried out skeleton of another tree in the middle ground set the stage. Each of these little features, as gorgeous as they are, guide the eye to the true focus of the painting, the woman standing in the foreground.

The woman's appearance is not what I expected when I heard the title. Her tiny squat frame is fiercely maternal and looks very caring. She seems incredibly strong as a woman would have to be to scrape by in such a harsh environment and society. Her dress is traditionally African: loosely cut for the hot weather and patterned wonderfully with bright yellow spots on a deep blue

background. In addition to the strength in the woman's stance and tiny stature, there is equal kindness and caring in her face. Soft blue eyes and rounded lips make her seem approachable. Even in adversity she can stay kind and peaceful and not be hardened by years and years of stress and hardship.

When I first looked at this painting, I saw almost none of this, but each time I looked, something more became apparent. The layering of the objects make it seem like a living breathing environment and not just a single facet. First I saw was the sunset. Next it was the trees. After that it was the woman and her house. Now each time I look, I notice something new: like the expression on the woman's face, or the texture of the text layered beneath it. This keeps me coming back, hoping that I'll learn something new and adds intrigue that art often lacks for me.

Much of the layering comes from the medium my mom uses, a technique I've never seen before. She creates a unique base for each of her paintings with a collage of torn vintage book pages. The book pages are a great medium because the soft old paper is a perfect receptacle for the rich soft pastel colors she adds on top. She paints the pastels with acrylic medium to turn them translucent and make them permanent. It takes a special kind of avant garde thinking to make something new out of a book that is nearly a century old, and although some may see it as blasphemy, I view it as repurposing. More often than not, no one is reading these books, and by painting on them they gain new life.

The influence of this painting is obviously very African. The landscape is a barren, yet very much alive, savannah and the hut is exactly like those in the village where my mom has spent a lot of her time. My mom volunteers her time to a nonprofit that helps women in the rural Zambian village of Kashikishi start businesses and improve their livelihoods. This work has not only had a major influence on her personal life, but is also embedded in her painting. I can tell just by looking at the lines that her major influence was the work of the women she met in Africa. Because in a place where literacy is limited, pictures like this are worth well over a thousand words.

While the African woman stands on the surface of the page, below lies the true influence on the painting. Suzanne made it very clear when we spoke that her paintings need a story to go from the developmental stages to a finished, polished work. Even though she paints every day, she told me that, "It doesn't become a bigger piece until I decide who I'm painting for because then it turns into something more meaningful for me" on the days that she doesn't see inspiration, she works on honing her craft so that when she feels something that inspires her, her work will be just that much better. During our interview Suzanne said that this was her favorite work, and I can see from the passionate use of colors that she clearly put plenty of time and effort into a heartfelt visualization of her story.

The story itself comes from her father, who grew up in a poor family in rural New Hampshire. Fortunately he was guided by this woman standing in front of her home on the African plain, ready for anything. Her name was Meme, and

she was my great grandmother. Meme was the Quebecoise immigrant I mentioned earlier. She spoke more French than English, and had to fight to survive for much of her life. While she was technically married, she essentially raised her four children single handedly. Her life was one hardship after the next, ranging from moving cities far too frequently looking for work, to struggling to care for her children through the harsh New Hampshire winters. All of this considered, it's hard to imagine she could find any way to stay happy and not be hardened by the world, but my grandfather says that Meme was never brought down by her life. Through thick and thin she kept the smile on her face and was always the most caring person in the world. She never held a grudge, she never got down, and she never let her children see the toll the hardship was taking, if it did at all.

When my mom first heard this story it was right after she had returned from Africa and had fresh in her mind the stories of the many women she worked with. Naturally she immediately associated the two and was inspired. In "Woman's Work" I can tell where both the African and Quebecois stories are told. The woman in question is obviously African, living in the poverty-stricken village of Kashikishi, but just like Meme, she has a smile on her face and a kind look in her eye. As I keep looking at the painting I see more and more similarities and homages to Meme, like smiling eyes, a small frame (Meme was 4' 10"), and once again, the kind look that I cannot keep noticing for its power. Below the translucent layers of pastel-paint is a collage of old book pages. For "Woman's

Work” the book used is an early twentieth century French-English dictionary, yet another subtle tribute to the hard work of Meme.

I can tell that in each painting I see, there is a part of my mom within it. Our home and the homes of our closest friends are filled with her works, because it’s much easier to let go of the painting if she knows it will still be close and cared for. This was the first time that I ever really grasped how art could be so expensive, given the materials couldn’t have cost more than a fraction of the sale value. They become so much more than the paper they are painted on. It’s through this one piece that the true intrinsic value of art has become clear and opened my eyes.