

## Exploring the depths of human emotion

Work draws on old art forms and new technology to delve into human emotion

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Ellen Scobie doesn't mind if people don't understand the technical aspects of her work.

She isn't concerned whether viewers comprehend the hundreds of hours of effort and countless images that go into each of her works. What she wants, more than anything, is to convey feeling - to allow people to experience in their soul the emotions attached to the fundamental fact of being human.



CREDIT: Larry Wright/THE RECORD  
Painting with pixels: Ellen Scobie is showing her digital photomontage work at the Plaskett Gallery. The exhibition, Memory Ambushed: The Ambiguity of Feeling, features work that draws upon Scobie's background in printmaking and her skills in new technology.

Scobie, a Burnaby resident, has her work featured at the Plaskett Gallery at Massey Theatre in New Westminster until April 20. The exhibition, Memory Ambushed: The Ambiguity of Feeling, displays Scobie's digital photomontage pieces - in effect, layered pieces incorporating elements from a variety of photographs and scanned objects, composed digitally into one image.

"I hope that people are drawn to it because it resonates with them on some level," she says thoughtfully. "They're not meant to be highly conceptual. They're just meant to be experienced on an emotive level."

"They" being a wide range of images that show Scobie's evolution as an artist over the past few years of working with her new digital techniques.

They include earlier works such as Downtown With Daffodils, evoking the feeling of an urban springtime, and The Window, which explores - as its title suggests - a series of openings.

"I was still kind of exploring the idea of collage," she explains.

Her later works, she says, are no longer really "collage" in the traditional sense because she no longer uses images and objects based on their actual meaning. That is, if she includes a building or a tree in the work, it won't be because of the fact that it's a building or a tree - its actual meaning is irrelevant. Instead, she chooses images strictly for their structural characteristics - colour, line, form, texture.

Scobie considers her collection of some 12,000 images - photographs she's

taken and scans of random items - to be, in effect, her digital paintbox.

Using Photoshop, she then takes what she calls her "palette of pixels" and begins the process of creating a work by layering multitudes of different images - one work can have as many as 75 layers.

She notes that the process stems, in many ways, from her background in printmaking. Through her art history studies at the University of Manitoba, she took courses in stone lithography, which was her first artistic love.

"For the first time, I was introduced to an artistic medium where the result was close to what I saw," she recalls.

It wasn't until years later, when she was employed in marketing for an architectural firm and began to work on retouching photos, that she began to pick up skills in new digital software.

"Something started to coalesce in my mind, with my artistic background and my new skills in Photoshop," she says.

Since she entered the new realm of digital photomontage, her learning has been through trial and error.

Scobie relies on the Internet as a source of inspiration and information, noting that she's found many other artists who are using Photoshop to create works. She has drawn on the work of photographers working in collage - which, she notes, has had a bit of a revival in digital form.

She has incorporated some of those skills but still approaches her work, she says, as a painter.

"I consider my work to be paintings, but I'm painting with pixels," she says. "They read as paintings, yet they reference a process of printmaking."

She never knows, she says, exactly what's going to happen when she starts a work. She begins with an image that grabs her attention - "it becomes like a splotch of colour on the canvas" - and simply lets the work grow.

"You start to form a dialogue with the work as it evolves," she says.

In the process, she says, Photoshop has become what she likes to call her "non-thinking collaborator." It's more than a tool, she says, because there are so many variables and parameters possible with the software that she's never sure what the end result will be.

"There's often this element of surprise and of chance that I like," she says.

Knowing when a piece is actually finished can be a challenge, she confesses. She saves many versions of one work and relies on what she calls "the endless undo" - the Command-Z key combination that allows her to undo the last action she made - to get to a finished product.

Once she's satisfied with a finished image, she has it printed and transferred onto paper or canvas. For that work, she uses outside professionals in B.C. and Quebec, depending upon the size of the image and the type of printing required.

The end result are pieces of art that speak to the viewer as paintings. A new series printed on watercolour paper, for instance, appears on first glance to be a group of watercolours.

Waterside Reverie captures the feeling of the life that teems on a quiet stretch of beach. When Birds Fly explores what a bird must feel like in flight. Water Garden captures the moment of contentment and joy of being in a sun-filled garden.

Other works incorporate some eclectic scanned items. Night Fears, for instance, uses scans of plastic six-pack holders.

"I like using ephemera that, really, it's junk, but I'm using it for its formal qualities, the patterning of it," she explains.

Scobie won't pick a favourite among her work - "how can I choose between my children?" she jokes - but she does point to one, titled Deer Lake Park, as an important turning point for her.

It's made up of a series of images, all shot in her neighbourhood and drawn from her personal history. But what makes it stand out was the fact that it was the first time she moved away from keeping an object wedded to its meaning.

"This was an important work for me in divorcing the colour from its subject matter," she says.

Deer Lake Park is a work she related to on a purely emotional level, she says, and that's how she hopes it - and all her work - comes across to others as well.

"This gives me a way to communicate on a deeper level," she says.

Scobie is passionate about wanting to open those lines of communication with her audience. She wants her work to help generate an emotion in its viewers. Those emotions may be different from her own, she says, and based on different experiences and past histories - yet, hopefully, they meet somewhere on a deep, often unspoken, level that couldn't be expressed in ordinary, day-to-day conversation.

Finding common ground as people is becoming increasingly important, she says, as people become more isolated. She notes that, with populations now being so mobile and people in many cases moving many thousands of miles from their homelands, there are numerous communities of people who appear to have little in common. She points out the number of different cultures and languages in Greater Vancouver.

"We all come from so many different backgrounds, we've had so many different experiences, how can we relate to each other?" she says. "If I can communicate with someone through the shared experience of feeling, ... it creates that bridge, breaking some kind of isolation."

Even as Scobie enjoys having her work on display at Plaskett - she notes that, because of its location in the theatre lobby, attached to the high school, it attracts a diverse cross-section of people - she's already eyeing the future.

Memory Ambushed: The Ambiguity of Feeling is on in the Plaskett Gallery until April 20. The gallery in the lobby of Massey Theatre, 735 Eighth Ave. in New Westminster. Call 604-517-5900 for visiting hours.

To learn more about Scobie's work, visit her website at [www.verosimile.com](http://www.verosimile.com).

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