

Joyful revelations: Glenbow exhibit covers colourful work and career of Gathie Falk

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Artist Gathie Falk in her Vancouver studio. Courtesy, Equinox Gallery

When the McMichael Canadian Art Collection opened *Gathie Falk: Revelations* last summer, the world was still groggily emerging from the pandemic years.

So there was no doubt already a significant pent-up desire in those attending the Vaughn, Ont. gallery to see something substantial after a lengthy period of restricted access to art. But it could also be argued that the playful and infectious joy of Falk's art made it a particularly appealing antidote to those dark years of COVID, lockdowns and isolation.



Gathie Falk's Floating Cabbages. Courtesy, Glenbow Museum. jpg

"It was just fantastic to be able to put this show up at the McMichael just as we were all coming out of COVID," says Sarah Milroy, chief curator at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection and

curator of Revelations, a travelling exhibition that will be at Glenbow at the Edison until Oct. 15. "People would just go in there and say 'I've never had so much pleasure in an exhibition.' People were just so starved for joy and for wonder and the show is full of that."

Which is not to say that Falk, who is still an active artist at the age of 95, doesn't address serious and occasionally dark issues in her work. There is a haunting quality to some of Falk's later pieces that feature three-dimensional ceramic or papier-mache renderings of empty shirts and dresses, which Milroy says were at times meant to commemorate lost friends.

There seems a definite spark of feminism in *The Problem with Wedding Veils*, a 2010-2011 papier-mache sculpture of an empty wedding veil weighed down by rocks that Milroy calls "a sculptural meditation on marital complexity" that "explores the tension between freedom and stability."



The Problem With Wedding Veils, by Gathie Falk. Courtesy, Glenbow Museum. jpg

But there is no mistaking the overwhelming sense of celebration and joy in the work, which spans from the early 1960s to the 2010s and covers Falk's eclectic output in painting, sculpture,

ceramics, performance art and video. Falk offers brightly covered sculptures of everyday objects including piles of glossy and occasionally rotting fruit, meticulously crafted floating cabbage and an entire section dedicated to a series of vividly coloured ceramic shoes and boots. She had a period where she was particularly obsessed with picnics, as well, offering both a number of performances with colleague Tom Graff in the 1960s on the subject and a slightly surreal series of ceramic sculptures. All of which conveys a sense of joy in everyday life or an “exaltation of the ordinary,” Milroy says.

With pieces in museum collections across the country and career-retrospective exhibitions at the Vancouver Art Gallery and National Gallery of Canada in her honour, Falk is certainly regarded as a major artist in this country. Still, Milroy says there is something about the “bountiful beauty” in her work that might lead some to take it less seriously when compared to the “austerities” of an Alex Colville or Christopher Pratt.

“Something that is deadly serious is more likely, I think, to be seen as important than something that is defiantly joyful,” Milroy says. “But that shouldn’t be so. You don’t look at this and see evidence of a tortured psyche, for example. What you see is a robust display of a human being making the most of things and getting on with the very best things in life. Perhaps it doesn’t fit with our notion of the angst-ridden artist. Even though Gathie’s life has had all sorts of hardship in it, with her art she plows forward and she affirms joy in life. To my mind that doesn’t make her any less serious, just all the more admirable.”



From the Glenbow exhibit Gathie Falk: Revelations. Courtesy, Glenbow Museum. jpg

Falk certainly had a hard-scrabble early life. She was born in Manitoba in a Mennonite family that had escaped persecution fleeing Russia after the 1917 revolution. Her early years in Canada were full of struggle. Forced to leave high school as a teenager in order to help support her family, she did plenty of factory work in her early years. That included a stint in a shoe factory, which may have sparked her interest in boots and shoes, and working in a store where she would measure dry goods, a repetitive job that is echoed in work such as the ceramic piles of fruit. She later spent years as a teacher, which was one of few careers open to women at the time. When she began dedicating herself full-time to her art, she quickly earned a reputation for experimentation and desire to explore a number of different form. That included pioneering work such as 1972's performance art piece *Red Angel*, captured on video and on display as part of *Revelations*. It is regarded as landmark piece of feminist art that arrived just as the avant-garde scene was surfacing in Vancouver.

"As a feminist, I look at her and see someone who was probably slated to be an obedient Mennonite wife," says Milroy. "Her upbringing was extremely conservative and that would have been the expectation."

Still, while the feminist leanings of pieces such as the aforementioned *The Problem With Wedding Veils* might seem apparent to viewers, Falk herself has rarely given hard-and-fast labels to her work.

"You ask her about the wedding veil — obviously it is a statement about the beauty and obligations of matrimony — but she'll just say 'Oh, no, no, no, the rocks just keep the wedding veil from tipping over.' She is almost Warhol-esque in her refusal to answer questions about her motivations. I think she is a real believer in visual ideas: A visual image is a much more nuanced and complex thing than anything that language can achieve. So she refuses to translate. That task is left to us."

Gathie Falk: Revelations is at Glenbow at the Edison until Oct. 15.