

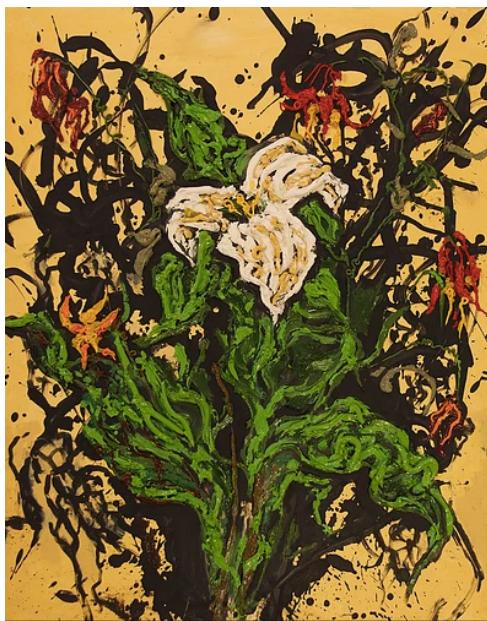
***Sanctuary Series* by Danica Loncar: Place, Paint and Feminist Patrimony**

Essay by Kathleen Vaughan

Wood anemone, large flowered bellwort, sharp-lobed hepatica, spring beauty: the musical names of these spring blooms conjure the Ontario wild, the moist and green terrains of our forests, an oasis of nature and a sanctuary for the urban soul.

These four Ontario wildflowers feature in the first work of Danica Loncar's *Sanctuary Series*, a cycle of 13 artworks about place, paint and a feminist patrimony. Using the familiar visual rhetoric of botanical painting - isolating the subject on a neutral ground - *Sanctuary* pays tribute to the specific flora of the Magwood Sanctuary, a remnant woodland marsh and old growth forest along the reaches of Toronto's lower Humber River. The textured surfaces of the works writhe with extruded oil paint, thick and glistening, its irrepressible energy and innovative technique very much of the 21st century. At the same time, there is a historical tribute here: Loncar's works gesture lovingly to the watercolour paintings of pioneering Canadian artist, Agnes Dunbar Moodie Fitzgibbon Chamberlin (1833-1913), who also depicted the wildflowers that grow in this same area. The first ten works of Loncar's series derive from Chamberlin's own, drawing on their groupings and compositions as they appeared in the groundbreaking book, *Canadian Wild Flowers* (1868). This first botanical text of the newly formed country of Canada features Fitzgibbon's full-page individually hand-coloured lithographs as well as text by her aunt, renowned pioneer writer Catherine Parr Traill. All of these creative women have loved and been inspired by their Ontario homelands, Parr Trail the Lakefield/Peterborough area and Chamberlin and Loncar the lower Humber River watershed around Baby Point. Loncar and Chamberlin are neighbours separated by a century's worth of time and change, but akin in their love of their common nearby woods and the wildflowers within them.

Sanctuary Series Plate 3: Rock columbine, Large White Trillium, Yellow Adder's Tongue.



Place: Magwood Sanctuary as Muse

Today, the Magwood Sanctuary (adjacent to Magwood Park on Baby Point) comprises about 25 riverside acres of rare woodland marsh and precious Carolinian forest, a relic of the times before human habitation. Characterized by broad-leaved deciduous trees such as the birch, ash, oak, hickory, walnut and the tulip tree that once grew abundantly from the Carolinas to southern Ontario, these woods provide a rich habitat for numerous species of animals and plants, including the wildflowers that delight(ed) both Fitzgibbon and Loncar.

From times of early human presence, the Humberside woods have been meaningful both to residents and those who passed through them, first using the river and its portages on the Carrying Place Trail towards Lake Simcoe, and now more likely taking the paved multi-use trail that runs along the riverbank from Lake Ontario 30 kilometres north to the city's edge. In the 17th century, the Five Nations Iroquois Seneca peoples lived here in the village of Teiaigon and honoured their dead in local burial mounds, still visible. The ravine valley has been described as a spiritual place for the Huron Wyndats, Six Nations and Mississaugas. That said, by the mid-1800s, this area - like Ontario's southwest as a whole - was a place of increasing white settlement and burgeoning growth: a young widow with a family to support, Fitzgibbon moved here to Lambton House, with the adjacent woods becoming a family playground and creative inspiration.

Of course, population growth and the creation of cities threatened the forests that these artists and other Canadians love and have loved. In fact, writing in 1852 about the loss of Kawartha woods near her, Traill's words seem contemporary in their alarm: "Man has altered the face of the soil. The mighty giants of the forest are gone, and the lowly shrub, the lovely flower, the ferns and mosses that flourished beneath their shade, have departed with them.... Where now are the lilies of the woods, the lovely and fragrant Pyrolas, the Blood-root, the delicate sweet scented Michella repens? Not on the newly cleared ground, where the forest once stood."¹ Today, experts estimate that about 90 percent of Canada's Carolinian forest and wetlands has been lost to development of cities and farms,² making the Magwood Sanctuary particularly valuable as a site of many species at risk.

As early as 1912 - the year before Chamberlin's death and partly as a result of the influence of her work - Torontonians were realizing the importance of preserving the woods around Baby Point. Local developer Robert Home Smith, whose plans laid the footprint for extensive residential construction in the area, wrote into house lot purchase agreements a clause forbidding any incursion into the ravine or damage to trees. By the time of his death in 1935, the local woods and marsh were already designated and protected as a 'sanctuary', which means that local residents can continue to cherish them 80 years later. Loncar writes of this wild, dark forest habitat,

"The damp, dewy, dripping and muddy environment I observe when walking through the wet moist atmosphere of the Magwood Sanctuary is represented in my pieces. My approach is less about scientifically identifying each plant and flower than it is with identifying my own sensations of the area and the diversity and attraction to the variety of plants and flowers that comfortably and harmoniously live in the same swampy, wetland environment."

Sanctuary Series Plate 6: Canadian Harebell, Showy Lady's Slipper, Wild Orange Red lily.



Paint: For Love of the Material

Sanctuary Series, Wild Columbine and Harmony of Species



In her studio adjacent to the Magwood Sanctuary, Loncar uses the lush materiality of oil paint to interpret the fecund abundance of life in the nearby ravine, to create her own versions of the Magwood wildflowers and Chamberlin's interpretations thereof. Her interest is not naturalistic fidelity or botanical specificity, as was Agnes Fitzgibbon Chamberlin's. Instead, Loncar offers the viewer a felt understanding of her painting process, which layers extruded strings of paint into an aggregating conglomeration, creating a mosaic-like image that stands in viscous relief from the board it is built upon. A cascade of vibrant colours in a chorus of jewel tones echoes the sumptuous hues of the flowers - and flower paintings - that inspired them. The hot, rich, oil-soaked surfaces of the *Sanctuary* paintings are alive in the alchemical way that art critic and theorist James Elkin would recognize, sparked by "an infusion of spirit into something inert"³ - that is, Loncar's love of the forest into the oil and pigment of her paints.

Loncar's 13 mid-sized works are of a scale that invites individual contemplation and mirrors Chamberlin's original page-sized images. The ten works that parallel the plates of Chamberlin's *Wild Flowers of Canada* are all 16 by 20 inches; the three compositions of Loncar's own, representing the current flora of the Sanctuary, are slightly larger, at 24 by 24 inches.

Classically trained in drawing and painting at the Ontario College of Art and Design University (AOCA 1992), Loncar in the *Sanctuary Series* does not stroke, dab or smear her paint to create her works. Rather, searching for an appropriate contemporary way to represent the flowers of the Magwood Sanctuary and to mirror Chamberlin's own technical and financial limitations (described further below), Loncar innovated a practice of extruding paint. She writes:

"I tried to internalize Chamberlin's experience, imposing a restraint on my own availability of tools by foregoing the use of a range of different brushes and instead choosing to execute the pieces with a combination of a few small-sized plastic hypodermic syringes. I also fashioned my own altered syringes by cutting into, shaving and filing down existing ones to create new tools for different techniques and applications. To my surprise I discovered, in contrast to what I expected, that the painstakingly slow application of paint and restrictive technique of using a few small syringes to apply the paint was in fact incredibly liberating. I enjoyed the directness of the application, much like drawing with paint rather than painting with it."

Extruded paint, with its insistent plasticity of form, gleaming colour and active surfaces, ensures that Loncar's paintings partake of the new materialism that is sweeping through the arts, exploring "agential matter" - matter with agency and potency that displaces human primacy - as opposed to "passive matter."⁴ Built on a 'post-humanist' philosophical shift of thinking that recognizes the unsustainability of putting humans above other species in our current environmentally fragile, globalized world, the material turn acknowledges the need to recalibrate human/non-human relationships towards greater equity. Such a recalibration is palpable in Loncar's works - and inchoate in the Victorian paintings that sparked them.

Sanctuary Series, Wild bergamot and Harmony of Species



Feminist Patrimony: Celebrating Our Local Artistic Foremothers

Sanctuary Series Plate 5: Smaller lady's slipper, Larger yellow lady's slipper, Larger blue flag, Small cranberry

In the mid-19th century, when Agnes Fitzgerald (not yet Chamberlin) created the watercolour paintings that became the basis of the plates in her celebrated *Canadian Wild Flowers*, the world was a different place from the one we live in now. Canada was struggling towards nationhood, with confederation uniting Ontario, Quebec and the Maritime provinces in 1867. South-central Ontario was still a strange new world to the European settlers: many of our lively plants were completely unknown to the newcomers who encountered them. Often unruly, mysterious and even poisonous, these flora had - to locals' knowledge - no official scientific names, with the Latinate Linnaean system of plant classification still in development; common names could vary from town to town, there being little in means by which to share understanding, and little understanding to share. Catherine Parr Traill, who immigrated to Canada from England in 1832, found scant information in the few scientific texts available, and often gave her own names to the plants and wildflowers that grew near her Peterborough home. To these early Victorians, these strange plants certainly seemed to be vibrant, agentic matter!

Nor was there much of a Canadian art scene: gradually, starting in the early 1800s, art exhibitions showcased works by both men and women, but the work of most women artists working before 1900 was not held in high esteem. After all, they "were attracted by the delicate wildflowers, the

butterflies and the people, all of which they interpreted with the usual Victorian sentiment”⁵ - or so proposed an art historical text as recently as 1975. Perhaps this writer should look again at Chamberlin’s work and delve more deeply into her story, as did Loncar.

Of course while Agnes Chamberlin loved the plants she depicted and created her works within the aesthetic of her times - as do all artists - in fact her great project of *Canadian Wild Flowers* was not a hobbyist’s casual pastime, but the practical entrepreneurial gambit by a woman in significant need of money. Widowed at aged 32 with six children to support, Chamberlin shrewdly assessed her own marketable skills (painting) and the subject she knew and rendered best (wildflowers); the nation-building fervor of the newly minted Canada, oriented to self-celebration; the state and practices of publishing at the time, which in a Victorian version of ‘kickstarting’, involved pre-selling shares in a book to raise productions funds - and gave her best pitch. Montreal-based publisher James Lovell made her (and collaborating author Catherine Parr Traill) a deal, suggesting that to keep costs down, the book feature just 25 key plants, grouped in 10 illustrated plates. Further, Lovell required that Chamberlin deliver the colour illustrations herself, using the then new-to-Canada technique of lithography, printmaking using a stone base, and that she pre-sell the edition, 500 copies of the book at \$5 a volume, an expensive proposition at the time.

Even more expensive were the lithography costs, as Chamberlin discovered to her chagrin: for a professional printer to create the full colour plates would have cost her \$1,500 - ten times the annual income of both Chamberlin and Traill.⁶ Indomitable, Chamberlin determined that “If no one else could, I must endeavour to do it myself.”⁷ And indeed, with the help of her daughters Maime, aged 16, Cherie, 13, and Alice, just 10, Chamberlin successively drew the 10 designs on the stone, pulled the prints and hand-coloured each of the 5000 images that comprised the first edition. A huge undertaking!! But it paid off: the work was an immediate popular and critical hit. Even within English Canada’s limited market of just 40,000 readers, within a year and a half, *Canadian Wild Flowers* saw sales of not just 500, but 1500 copies, making possible new and increasingly expensively produced editions. Ultimately, four editions of *Canadian Wild Flowers* were printed. The book was hailed by the periodical *New Century* as “one of the most remarkable works ever attempted by a woman.”⁸ Today, Chamberlin’s work is celebrated at Lambton House, her one-time residence and now a small museum in Toronto’s Baby Point area; her books are preserved in collections and archives such as the Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library at the University of Toronto and the Toronto Public Library.

Chamberlin’s tale of grit and achievement inspired Loncar, especially given her own longstanding orientation to feminist artistic practices. Agnes Chamberlin’s story, her work, and her allegiance to the forest that Loncar so loves, proved an irresistible combination, as Loncar writes:

“A range of considerations including the feminine and feminist creative practices of identification and identifying with place, the female attachment and connection to community and the domestic world, the attraction to botany and nature, flowers, plants and the female symbolism attached to them, the strength to create in the face of obstacles and adversity within the struggle for simple survival, all attracted me to the subject of both the Agnes and “her” flowers. The traditional female interest in botany, flowers, plants and the natural world or “mother nature” is recognized in the works of many pioneering female artists throughout history from Giovanna Garzoni, Mary Delaney, Emily Carr, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Frida Kahlo to Joyce Wieland, whose common link to Agnes is an attachment to their own immediate community and home, and the cultural, environmental heritage of its habitat.”

Looking at each of Loncar’s 13 works, the viewer senses her fervent connection to the living flora of the Magwood Sanctuary and her commitment to its vibrant matter. Learning the story of Agnes Chamberlin, artist and entrepreneur, we also encounter Loncar’s allegiance to matrilineal creative practices, her sisterhood with her forebears and with contemporary women artists. Mostly, we delight in the richness of the aesthetic and intellectual experience Loncar’s *Sanctuary Series* offers us, work by sumptuous work.

Sanctuary Series, Daisy Weed and Harmony of Species



Notes:

¹ Written to the editor of the Genesee Farmer about the disappearance of indigenous species in the rush to clear land, and quoted in Charlotte Gray's article about Agnes Fitzgibbon, Catherine Parr Trail, and their *Canadian Wildflowers* project. See Charlotte Gray, "Wild at Heart" in *Canadian Geographic*, Vol. 119 (Sept/Oct 1999), Issue 6, p. 42 ff.

² Lorraine Johnson, *Natural Treasures of Carolinian Canada: Discovering the Rich Natural Diversity of Ontario's Southwestern Heartland*. James Lorimer & Co, 2007, p. 13.

³ James Elkins, *What Painting Is*, 2000, p. 48.

⁴ For a discussion of this 'material turn,' as this development has come to be called, please see Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt's *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' Through the Arts*. London: I.B. Taurus, 2012.

⁵ Michael Bell, *Painters in a New Land, From Annapolis Royal to the Klondike* (Toronto, 1973): 13.

⁶ Alexander Globe, "Canadian Wildflowers" [presentation on the history of Chamberlin's *Canadian Wild Flowers*], 2011, available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atKTP8izl6U> Globe is Professor Emeritus of the Department of English at the University of British Columbia.

⁷ Charlotte Gray, "Wild at Heart" in *Canadian Geographic*, Vol. 119 (Sept/Oct 1999), Issue 6, p. 42 ff.

⁸ Gray, *ibid.*

Additional Resources:

- 1) Agnes Chamberlin Digital Collection, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto <https://fisher.library.utoronto.ca/resources/agnes-chamberlin>
 - 2) FitzGibbon, Agnes, *Canadian Wildflowers* 1st edition 1868, Collection of Danica Loncar
 - 3) FitzGibbon, Agnes *Canadian Wildflowers* 4th edition 1895, Collection of Danica Loncar
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Biographies:

Danica Loncar: Danica Loncar is an Honours graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design, graduating with a Drawing and Painting major in 1992. She is also a past Lieutenant Governor's medal recipient. Loncar is a painter and teacher who taught both art and design at the college level. She was represented by Nancy Poole's Studio in Yorkville for a several years before founding Art Works Art School and Gallery, and has participated in numerous venues including juried shows, group shows, solo exhibitions and commissioned projects both in Canada and abroad. She has been featured in various publications and interviewed on radio, television and print and has participated as a juror and guest speaker for numerous events.

Loncar is the director, curator and founder of Art Works Art School and Gallery at 238 Jane Street in Toronto. She credits her inspiration and motivation for establishing Art Works Art School and Gallery to an opportunity given her by Joyce Wieland back in 1989 at Wieland's Alma Gallery in Toronto, where she invited and encouraged Loncar along with other young artists and students to show their work. She also sits on the board of the Baby Point Heritage Foundation committed to preserving the natural and architectural heritage of the neighbourhood, and is a founding member of the Baby Point Gates business improvement area promoting local businesses that encourage a pedestrian friendly local economy. Loncar recently chaired and led the creation of a community parkette for the Baby Point Gates historic area, which received a City of Toronto Award in 2014.

Kathleen Vaughan: Kathleen Vaughan is an artist, academic and educator with a particular orientation to questions of place and belonging and the theme of 'home'. Using multiple forms of art, text, and collage, much of Kathleen's work takes the form of mapping and explores walking as a knowledge practice and artist's method. Her award-winning artwork has been shown in museums, galleries, and artist-run centres in Canada and the Netherlands.

A Toronto resident for many years, Kathleen has taught art to adults at Concordia University, OCADU, and York University, and in community workshops, master's classes, and recreational contexts. She has worked as a visiting artist in Toronto schools, engaging more than 1000 children in the pleasures of thinking and making. She is now Assistant Professor of Art Education at Concordia University (Montreal), where she teaches graduate and undergraduate classes in studio practice, community art education, and photography.

Kathleen holds a B.A. (English and Art History) from the University of Toronto; an A.O.C.A. (Painting and Drawing) from the Ontario College of Art and Design University; a Master's of Fine Art (Studio Arts) from Concordia University; and a PhD (Education) from York University, Toronto, where her award-winning practice-based dissertation was the first of its kind in the Faculty of Education.