

Elsa Robinson

A Candle

Elsa Robinson is a mixed media artist, sculptor, and painter born in Toronto, ON but raised in Jamaica. She currently resides in Edmonton, AB. Elsa earned a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Art and Design (2013) from the University of Alberta and a Master of Fine Arts (2019) from the Vermont College of Fine Arts in Montpelier, Vermont. The final project for the latter used colour theory developed by a Jamaican spiritual leader and spoke to her spirituality. Her artwork incorporates African American imagery often made from natural objects. Elsa is inspired by Romare Bearden's collage and photomontage artwork and by Salvador Dali's surrealism. Bearden was a prominent figure in the African American art movement. She also connected Afro-futurist science-fiction authors such as Octavia Estelle Butler, Nalo Hopkinson and Nnedi Okorafor. Elsa has explored different religions and has done extensive research in art symbolism.

Growing up in Jamaica, art supplies were scarce, forcing Elsa to look at other objects for her art. She used shells and rocks, as well as special types of grass from the countryside and today sees this practice as a critical comment on the cost of art materials. Elsa learned embroidery, screen, and block printing in high school, as well as sewing, crocheting, and knitting from her mother. These crafts would eventually become part of her art practice.

Jamaica is a Christian country. In the Roman Catholic elementary school Elsa attended, students prayed regularly. She later went to an Anglican high school that would frequently have celebrations to commemorate different religious events and saints. Although she moved away from Christianity as she got older, she remained very spiritual. She found a connection with Rastafarianism because it contained African cultural influences. This was a strong



political statement for her. As a Rastafari she had real dreadlocks, not the fashionable ones you get from a hairdresser. Rastafari dreadlocks identified the wearer as having a different view of life. Women in Jamaica were expected to cover their hair and skin out of respect for the sacredness of their body. She dressed conservatively to reflect these values.

Elsa moved to Edmonton, Alberta in 1984. As a single mother with “two children in two different size diapers,” Elsa had to overcome many challenges, which are often the subject of her art. Her painting *How it was* depicts a woman holding a roof above her two children. On an altar sits a bowl of fruit, the spiritual element that sustained her during these hardships. The body of the woman contains metal which represents the strength it took to support her children. She wears black and white clothing.



Black and white checkered patterns appear throughout Elsa's art to represent uncertainty. The symbolism originates from European tradition, where Jesters would wear checkered black and white clothing and experience uncertainty while attempting to appease their King using jokes, stories, and songs. In *My story* Elsa and her two children sit on a sofa surrounded by various objects that reference the elements of nature and spirit helping her as a single parent. She had to depend on the kindness of strangers to survive because she had no family in Edmonton. Her support system included a bus driver that would always wait for her after university as she ran to the bus while carrying both her children and her school bag.

Elsa believes her responsibility as an artist is to offer humanity uplifting imagery that can help you in your life's journey. Elsa's work is meant to convey messages of healing and speak about the human experience. Teaching the deaf in Jamaica and being a Community Outreach Coordinator has given Elsa insight on people from

various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. She uses art to encourage people to be mindful, in the moment, and to ask themselves "Who am I?" in times of difficulties. This sentiment is captured in *Hmmm*. Her choice of symbols are intentional. For example, a candle represents religions, alluding to the presence of Christ, the divine, ancestors and much more. Elsa investigates symbols that have common connotations across many cultures, so that different people can relate to her work. Even if people do not know what the symbols mean, they react to them subconsciously.

"When you're moving on the chess-board, you are never sure if your next move will be successful or not."

Elsa presents strong ideas and concepts that are sometimes political. She can show her dissatisfaction when women hide

their culture and disavow who they are. Her art questions social rule and social order. Her experiences at NorQuest College, YEG Youth Connect, and at a women's prison also opened Elsa's heart to the needs of humanity. Art is important for society because it makes people imagine a better tomorrow. Elsa's work has not gone unnoticed. She is the recipient of the Cultural Diversity in the Arts Inaugural Award, the Award for Excellence in the Arts from the National Black Coalition of Canada, and First Prize in the 2015 Spruce Grove Senior's Art Competition. She has also been shortlisted for the 2022 Eldon and Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize.

Based on an interview with Isaac Belland