

Forest piles are allegories for life

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Posted: 3:37 PM CDT Tuesday, Sep. 28, 2021



PHOTO BY HELEN LEPP FRIESEN

Painter Ingrid McMillan wondered who was creating the orderly piles of wood in Crescent Drive Park - the she found out.

Fort Garry artist and painter Ingrid McMillan regularly walks through Crescent Drive Park, where she notices ever-changing lines of trees,

patterns, light, colours, and now the sneak peek of fall. The forest and the people who frequent the park have inspired her art.

Art has always been a part of McMillan's life, starting when she was very young and setting up art projects in her room on weekends was a natural pastime.

When she was 12, she began painting lessons with a German painter after her Saturday morning German lessons. Once she reached high school, McMillan consciously chose not to take art because she thought she should consider a financially viable career option.

McMillan decided to go to art school after all when, after her children were born, some of her paintings were accepted into the Winnipeg Art Gallery's rentals and sales program. In university, she studied art and art education.

A few years ago, McMillan retired from the Pembina Trails School Division after 22 years of teaching art and working as an art consultant for the division. Now she spends her days painting in her beautiful backyard studio.

She said one of the highlights of being a painter is that feeling when "you break through with something fresh for yourself. Like a good set. Like a good music score. Everything falls into place and hangs together. I don't have a system - I prefer to flow with where the paint lands, like a playful dance between paintbrush and my hand as navigator of this dance."

That subconscious state of mind is the ideal place to operate from.

Over the last few months, McMillan began to notice piles of deadwood accumulating in the forest during her walks through the park. Someone was caring for the woods.

"It appeared that somebody was intentionally coming here to make order out of chaos."

The first time she saw Henry Dueck, an elderly gentleman, carefully snipping wood and constructing piles was a magical moment. The mystery was solved.

"There he was so deeply engaged in tending to the fallen branches. I was struck by how easily he blended in with the egoless trees" she recalled.

At first, McMillan just watched him, not wanting to disturb the scene. Eventually they chatted and Henry told her he was cleaning up the forest so the trees could grow.

"I am very grateful to him for inspiring me," McMillan said.

Dueck told her about how, in past winters, he shovelled the sidewalk on his entire street to make pushing his wife in her wheelchair more manageable. She passed away last fall and he told her how proud he was of his two sons and grandkids who all live far away. McMillan was touched that Henry shared so openly with her being an absolute stranger.

She thoughtfully observed that the forest reflects our humanity and that she sees the piles Henry creates as measures of productivity, elements of life lived. The piles are arranged according to the diameter and length of sticks and branches, like chapters in our lives that have beginnings, ends, and depth. Henry represents all of us as we try to order and control our existence.

By caring for the forest, he is caring for himself. Making himself and his tools useful helps him feel alive again after his loss.

"I find it so refreshing to have stumbled upon this humanity with no other agenda but to be helpful to the trees."