

Spotlight: How a sarcophagus inspired poker-playing artist Maggie Wesley



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Spotlight is a weekly look at some of the people who contribute to the Ottawa area's arts community. This week we visited multimedia artist Maggie Wesley at her Dunrobin home. Her current exhibit, Spirit of Play, continues at the Shenkman Arts

Centre until Feb. 6.

“We started playing poker around 1973. We were all nurses working in psychiatry at the Royal Ottawa Hospital, in the formative group. And one of the women, Kate, decided that a poker game would be fun. And I still remember her first meal — a lasagna with a cream sauce. And she played Bolero and we drank way too much wine and had too much fun, so we decided that this just had to be a monthly event.

“There were just four of us at first, but gradually other people started to join in. They were all from the ROH, primarily on the addiction services, which is ironic. But we played for fun. It was called Five Cents and You’re In. That’s what the ante was. Ten dollars would have been a good night of winning in the beginning, and now it’s 20, so it hasn’t gone up that much. The ante has gone from five cents to 15 cents. And we only had one girl who left the group. She decided she would rather be involved in yoga and meditation and expend her energy that way.

“So we play once a month — the second Tuesday of the month — although we take off a couple of months in the summer. And the idea is that whoever hosts the game has to provide the meal and the wine, although the wine consumption has gone down completely. It used to be an incredible amount and we would play all night and leave at one in the morning, but now one bottle of wine will get you through the entire night.

“The women are a fascinating strong group. There’s Virginia, who is unfortunately now deceased. She was a psychologist with an immense intelligence and background. Worked for Addictions Research Foundation and has written textbooks and was incredibly witty. And we just found out from her that as a teenager when she graduated from high school, she worked for MI5 on Malta island, and why? She couldn’t tell us for 50 years, or until a certain number of years had passed because she was sworn to secrecy, so we just found out near the end of her life.



“Another one, Debi, started out as a nurse and ended up moving to psychology, then left that for high-tech. A scuba diver... And Eleanor, who was our matriarch.”

“There have been 10 women in total. Four of the women died and we’ve added others.

“So I was a nurse and I excelled and moved through the ranks fairly quickly, up to the head nurse level. But I felt the arts in me was growing stronger. As a teenager in high school, I was always supposed to go toward art, but never did, apart from on the side. So when I was almost 30, I was in an administrative level on forensic psychiatry, and I decided to apply to the Ontario College of Art and Design and ask for a year’s leave-of-absence. But then I decided to quit nursing. I thought ‘If I don’t jump into this with both feet, I’ll have something to fall back on, which is no good. But they hired me back every summer, which paid for my school. It was at OCAD that I fell in love with wood. It really captured my soul.

“The concept for this show started a long time ago. I had gone to visit Kate in New York, and we went to this museum and I saw a sarcophagus from Egypt. It opened up and it had a wax painting on it, and it was a woman. And for some reason it just fascinated me, and I said to her, ‘What

if I did an entire series of poker girls like that?’ And then life got in the way.

“It was over 10 years ago when I started on one. That was Nan. I worked at it sporadically and got four of the 10 done, but it wasn’t until I retired, in 2015, that I really went back to it. I got two more completed, then applied for this show, which gave me another year to get the last four done.

“I’ve tried to show my impression of the women when we were playing poker over the years. So sometimes it’s something very concrete about their life, such as in Debi’s case with the computer industry and the scuba diving. Sometimes it was their personality. Like for Nan’s: wherever she goes, she’s able to fit in, so I made the foreground and background become one with her. So that’s more of a concept, but I threw in a little of the concrete with her — she’s Nanny Goat, and has a collection of goat paraphernalia, so there are two goats in there. They were also all designed to resemble playing cards, with the same aspect ratio. And not bridge-card size, but poker cards.

“And now that they’re done and out there, I don’t ever want to see them again. I’m like one of those feral cats, you know, where they take their child after they get to however many months old, and they swat them and send them out and say, ‘You’re on your own, babe.’ I have no attachment. Once a piece is done, I don’t care about it. It’s the process that I love. And once I get de-cluttered from Christmas, I’m going to go right back into the studio. There are things I want to do.”

— *Maggie Wesley in her studio, Jan. 8, 2018.*

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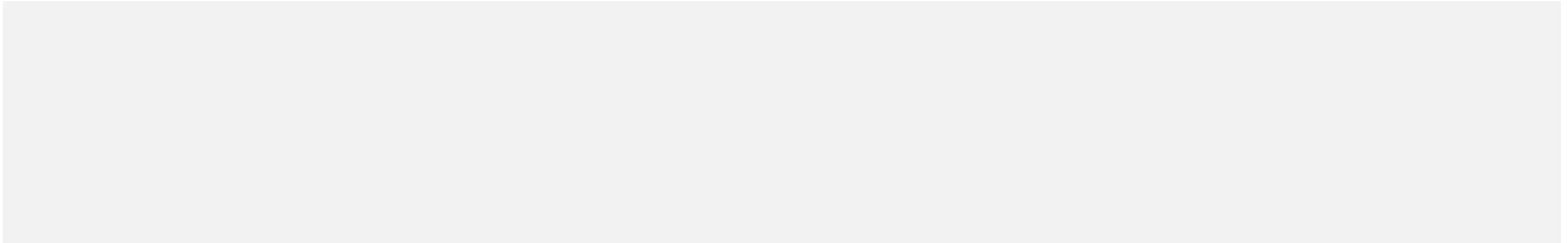
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