

# CANADIAN ART



## Sandra Meigs: At the Bottom of Everything

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When Sandra Meigs met me at her Open Space exhibition of murals and accompanying installation work, “The Basement Panoramas,” and we “walked” the paintings, I twice thought she said “grieving” when she was actually saying “breathing.” It was an interesting mistake to reflect upon, as the slippage between “grieving” and “breathing” reflects the continuity of the exhibition’s narrative—namely, from death to continuing life. The works are rooted in an immediate personal history: in January 2011, Meigs, who had recently married and purchased a home, lost her husband to cancer; during their final months together, she started to relate the crawlspace and bedrock of the 90-year-old house to mortality, a space removed from the traffic of waking life, yet, in the artist’s words, “containing time.”

The first of the murals, *Red. 3011 Jackson. (Mortality)*, named for the address of the house, relates this evocative reckoning to the networks layering the crawlspace: ducts, wires, cables and fuses, redundant or functional, vestigial or retrofitted, surrounding and commuting the vortex-like swirls of the stony floor. The 25-foot-long mural was composed of photos of the crawlspace taped together to form a panoramic view, from which a schematic rendering was derived for projection. The drawing’s contours look liberated in the radiant layers, supplying a bloodied lushness offset by Meigs’s neat parsing of constituents: a fuse box is “portal electrical,” an old five-panel door, the “door of mortal birth” and protruding bedrock a Wagnerian “universal realm.” The invocation of colour as transforming wavelength recalls Matisse’s iconic *Red Studio* (1911): a body-temperature continuum of fluidity and atmosphere, the objects within it (especially artworks) limned with light as if radiating significance. Meigs’s basement is a metacognitive space, a set of generative coordinates in

which—as in Matisse’s clock face without hands—the explicit depiction of action (past-present-future) is withheld.

Mortality became the first of a series, and Meigs’s research for the pictures that followed undertook travel. *Blue. 1000 Mountain Rest. (Breath)* takes its architectural underpinnings from the Mohonk Mountain House, a massive Victorian-era castle resort in New York State with storied origins in Quaker-based pacifism. This retreat was, for Meigs, also something of a sojourn into prior work: for her 2009 series *Strange Loop*, Meigs made trips to Newport, Rhode Island, and for her 2007 work *What the Inside Sees*, she visited the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York, in both cases assessing examples of 19th century shingle-style architecture. Meigs’s stripped renditions of these interiors simultaneously suggest the magical reality of children’s book illustration, and a labyrinthine tracery of cognitive routing: blank faces stationed on newel posts, coffers and risers in ceilings and staircases rolling along like conveyor belts; eyes and vortexes stare or suck.

*Breath* is based on the porte-cochère of the retreat, revised as a place of purgatorial procession. Meigs’s original drawing for the piece features figures composed almost entirely of faces seen in profile, pulpy caricatures reminiscent of James Ensor or Philip Guston. In the mural, rendered in quivering currents of warm and cool contour lines, facial features have become vulnerable whirlpools. As in Meigs’s past approaches to the figure (in series such as *Dummies*, *Resin Heads* or *The Fold Heads*), orifices are both the central focus of the *Breath* bodies, and also agents of distraction or deflection, like eyes painted on the wings of a butterfly, passive-aggressively protective. Tellingly, of the four murals, *Breath* is the only work without text. Also distinct is a painterly swirl that tugs at the surface tension of the mural like a bathtub drain. Meigs related the mural to breathing exercises she practiced while grieving, an elastic unit of measurement between the “shut-down” of mourning and the present tense.

Meigs’s travels also led to her sister’s home in Pennsylvania, the crowded basement of which provided the compositional elements of *Grey. 224 Main. (Transformation)*. The panorama depicted in *Transformation* has been mirrored vertically, and at first glance also appears to be mirrored horizontally. Lateral slicing of the panorama sandwiches the basement’s ceiling joists in the middle ground of the picture, furnishing (in Meigs’s words) a “spine”. On the left side of the vertical split are words suggesting beginnings (“miracle,” “realization,” “emergence”), and on the right, endings (“cessation,” “vanishing,” “extinction,” “eclipse.”) Meanwhile, the symmetry of the central split doubles a flood lamp to suggest two staring eyes, annotated with tags, “here” and “gone,” over a sprawling vortex.

In *Transformation*, the absorbent ground Meigs used to prime her supports works to great effect; lacking the chromatic saturation that radiates from the other murals, the grey layers appear more delicate, the apprehension of subtle variables of opacity and translucence implying both volume and vacancy. Likewise, drawing lines and captions, less buoyantly deployed in an achromatic scheme, seem analogous to scattered old tools featured in the background (a saw, a clock, some bottles, a broom) and their matter-of-fact mirror images. The basement becomes an extended still life in the tradition of the memento mori: objects are borne into light, then life, by being observed and painted, and observed once more. Rendering them everlastingly both preserves and precludes their continuity; they neither carry on nor fall away.

I am reminded of Meigs’s milestone series *Dummies*, eerie “portraits” of surrogate bodies, like the fantasies of Arcimboldo or de Chirico’s mannequins, but painted from actual puppet-like constructions of household objects the artist constructed in her studio. In a 1997 interview with Nancy Tousley in *Canadian Art*, Meigs related the *Dummies* to the memory of

having to identify her brother's body at the morgue. The notion of an alternate self engendered from fragments of reality is an age-old concern of still-life painting; its vitalization via art is the stuff of myths: the golem, Pygmalion, Frankenstein, the Invisible Man. There are no dummies in *Transformation*, but the face perched over the vortex, like a Romanesque weigher of souls, is key to the same will to vitalism that has informed Meigs's work for decades.

Victoria-based author Aaren Madden, writing in *Focus*, has compared the repeated images of faces in Meigs's *Strange Loop* to the moment in Ludwig Bemelmans's classic story *Madeline* when a child convalescing in hospital after appendicitis apprehends "a crack on the ceiling had the habit of sometimes looking like a rabbit." It is an interesting coincidence that the story goes on to see Madeline displaying her appendix scar to the wonderment of classmates, uniting crack and scar, illness and becoming. This invalid aesthetic features strongly in *Yellow. 435 Longmeadow. (Insomnia)*, a warm tableau of vibrating yellows and blues, divided up by four barriers, in the form of sketched curtains that partition a basement inhabited by four figures. This is the first time I can recall seeing figures rendered so anecdotally in Meigs's work. There is none of the peculiar theatre of absorption and repulsion that has confronted viewers previously. Instead, naturalistic figures perch or bask in empty, radiant spaces, surrounded by words that seem to catechize the past: "gamblers," "losers," "drifters," "creeps," "lost souls," "dreamers," "healers," "go-getters," "saints." On the right edge of the mural, a Whitmanesque invocation calls these characters to prepare for their reckoning, while the same folksy vernacular supplies a series of questions at the right:

"What?" cry the losers.

"Where?" shout the go getters.

"When?" speak the sweet souls.

"Why?" ask the planners.

"How?" moan the defeated.

"What lies beyond the illusion?" say they.

Meigs identifies the partitions in *Insomnia* with the curtains used to divide a basement used for a children's rec room, also in a sister's house, this time in Vermont. These frame stages for a morality play, even as the lint-lined cobwebs caused by a defective dryer vent drape like a discarded tissue of temporal vestments. It is tempting to read the murals as a whole (and *Insomnia* in particular) as an allegory of painting not unlike Courbet's *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory of a Seven Year Phase in my Artistic and Moral Life*: a self-portrait of the artist at work, dreaming an environment populated by models and supporters, made real by art alone.

For the exhibition at Open Space, Meigs has included two supplementary projects. The first is a collaborative project with artist Mowry Baden, and consists of lamp-like headgear that allows viewers to rotate the photographic panorama that produced *Transformation* at a slow glaze or dizzying blur. At the right speed, saccadic blindness relieves nausea, and the piles of antique objects that crowd the basement underworld become a flattened sea of neutral blues and golds. The lampshade's cliché connoting of tipsiness—"life of the party"—combined with the solipsism and self-consciousness induced by the headgear, prime viewers entering the gallery for the implicit tactility of the immersive murals.

Nearby are *The Bones in the Golden Robes*, a series of shrouded robot figures lined up along a catwalk-like platform. Concentric bands of yellow and white on platform and shroud heraldically unite the tableau with *Insomnia*. Five robots stand immobile as a sixth roves over the platform with juddering perambulations, causing clappers beneath its canopy to clack like

weathered wind chimes (a contribution aided by the input of Victoria composer Christopher Butterfield.) The ghost-like shrouds are both blind and anonymous, their hunched forms, and lap-like projections, pantomiming an awkward attendant carrying a tray or mendicant begging for alms; they are contingent figures. Reminiscent of both patient and nurse, they evoke a division of artists' roles, between exemplary sufferer and therapeutic mediator, a split recalling Jasper Johns' contrary categories of "watchman" and "spy." Oblivious to the viewer in their queue and clatter, they cast the rattle of bones into the meditative reverie of the murals, like branches tapping at a window.

*"The Basement Panoramas" will also be shown at Toronto's Susan Hobbs Gallery and Georgia Scherman Projects in early 2014.*