

Artist mines depths of personal tragedy

Sandra Meigs channels loss of her husband into The Basement Panoramas



Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid

Meigs' *Red. 3011 Jackson. (Mortality)* from *The Basement Panoramas*, named for the house Meigs' shared with her husband, expresses first contact with grief.

MURRAY WHYTE
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Life is a terribly, terribly fragile thing. Everything was going so well, we tend to say, and then: something happened.

So it was for Sandra Meigs three years ago when, not a full year after marrying her husband, she lost him to cancer. The house in Victoria they had bought together changed: less a symbol of their union, a bricks-and-mortar expression of two lives bound together, than one of Meigs' singular loss.

What emerged from this tragedy is perhaps the most potent work of Meigs' career. On view until March 1, *The Basement Panoramas*, four expansive, enveloping paintings from 7-1/2 to almost 14 metres long, sprawl over two galleries on Tecumseth St. Given their size, Meigs' long-time dealer Susan Hobbs couldn't accommodate more than two; so next-door neighbour Georgia Scherman stepped into the breach, lending her wall space to allow *The Basement Panoramas* the necessary room to breathe.

Meigs has spent much of the past several years painting interiors with her distinct, deceptively simple style, transforming built forms into a disorienting, haunting architecture of the mind. *The Basement Panoramas* charge this project with personal loss. The first of them, *Red. 3011 Jackson. (Mortality)*, is named for the house she and her husband shared, and serves as an almost overwhelming rendition of first contact with grieving.

Art born of grief walks a delicate line, always teetering on the precipice of the maudlin. Meigs, who is here this week for a screening of her films at the Gladstone Hotel Monday night, is nowhere near close to that edge. Her enigmatic style steers content that's emotionally charged into mysterious, oblique territory.

Mortality is bright red but riven in spots by searing bursts of white. It captures with stark honesty the inward turn loss can bring, emotionally and physically. Death has a cruel way of reordering priorities, imposing structure on the chaos of grief. Usually too soon, it sends us through the drawers and boxes, going through the earthly possessions of the departed, their absence amplified by the presence of too much stuff.

It's not hard to imagine Meigs here, below ground, engaged in the prosaic process of sorting and besieged by still-raw despair. Red all but screams of an emotional claustrophobia. Meigs paints three doors, open a crack. "Light enters," it reads in the spill of whiteness, like a weird taxonomy of an emotional landscape, and an attempt to impose order on a spiralling chaos (under a bunk painted in white, she's written "To Darkness," an apparent echo of a consuming futility).

It's raw, fractured and inescapable, a quietly powerful thing. It's also a little surprising for those who have followed Meigs over the years. She was very often playful, impish and cerebral. For *Strange Loop*, in 2009, Meigs visited New England manor homes in places like Rhode Island, representing their almost comic ornateness in a sinister grey. In the mix, strangely psychedelic faces seemed to emerge, but not quite. The same year, Meigs presented *The Fold Heads* at Hobbs, an idiosyncratic collection of not-quite-figurative, not-quite-abstract works that nonetheless teased at both.

The Basement Panoramas take in that eccentric ambiguity and freight it with something much closer to the bone. An oppressiveness reigns in each of the works, shifting tonally as they do through *Yellow (Insomnia)*, *Blue (Breath)* and *Grey (Transformation)*.

Insomnia is a chaotic swirl of sickly yellow peopled by a handful of restless figures beset by words that seem to serve as recriminations and what-ifs: Healers, Drifters, Weepers, Lovers, Saints, Fakers, Dreamers. *Breath* is electric, claustrophobic, charged by the random, collapsing architecture of its below-ground world. *Transformation*, with its dark greys and central vortex, seems to mirror the persistent numbness that follows the initial shock of loss: that dull, interminable plateau of a nagging ache.

By taking this all below ground, Meigs aligns herself with the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, who proposed, in his landmark text *The Poetics of Space*, that the basement of a home mirrored our irrational mind, and the storehouse of our memories and fears: a dark, scary place in which you'd only find yourself if you had no choice.

We can all relate to deferring the work of dealing with that accretion of unwanted things, nipping at our heels from below ground, daring us to clean house. What happens when your hand is forced? If *The Basement Panoramas* are any indication, a hell of a lot. Best to start going through those boxes, before they go through you.