



Covid Visions

ISOLATION IN COUNTRY & TOWN:

Painter Laureen Marchand +
Writer/Curator Paul Seesequasis

by
STEVEN ROSS SMITH



Saskatchewan
Arts Alliance

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"My daily life hasn't changed a lot because I live in a remote place, but I am very aware that outside my house everything is different," says painter and teacher Laureen Marchand, speaking from her home and studio, way in the south of the province in Val Marie Village, population one hundred twenty-six.

Artists in diverse regions, working various media, in these disorienting COVID pandemic days are doing their best to adapt, cope and continue to produce.

Speaking of the past few months, Marchand continues, "I've gone from fear to joy to exhaustion to it's a normal day."

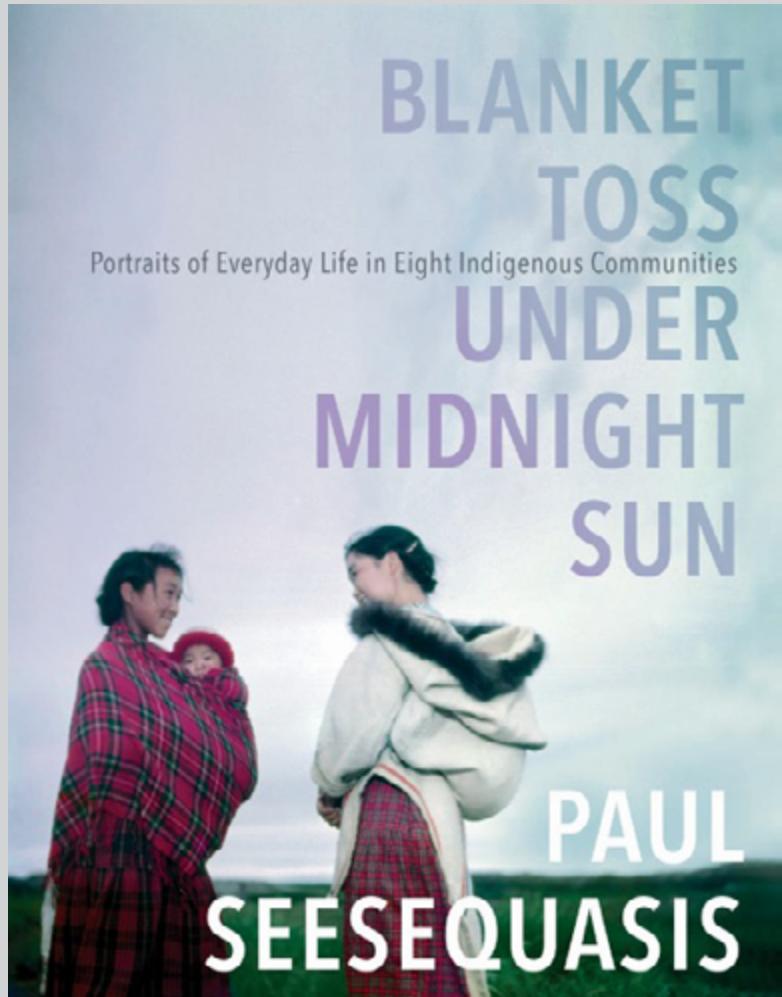
Artists' emotional states are not the only things fluctuating. Events have vanished, and with them income and promotional opportunities have disappeared.

Marchand's cancellation list includes an exhibition and three workshops, one in Ireland. "All the galleries that normally represent me



"Farewell My Lovely", oil on panel, 16" x 16", 2020

Disorientation, isolated days, wider distances, tighter belts, slower pace. Artists are adjusting and carrying on creating, while waiting for the new, though unpredictable, ‘normal’.



and sell my work have closed. The ongoing effect is enormous.”

Meanwhile, isolated within Saskatoon City, writer and curator Paul Seesequasis has seen his spring and summer appearances evaporate. “A major graphic exhibition I had at the Glenbow in Calgary, [The Photography of Metis Activist James Brady] is in mothballs now,” he says. “I was going up north to do workshops with Dene youth and that got cancelled; an event with Shelagh Rogers at Saskatoon’s Broadway Theatre is cancelled; Moose Jaw’s Book Festival, the Sunshine Book Festival, cancelled. I was to be part of the Canadian delegation going to Frankfurt. My book was to be launched there.”

Such cancellations have significant impact on artists’ already precarious finances. Agencies have sprung into the vacuum to offer emergency financial relief, and these include: the federal government with the Canada Emergency Relief Benefit; the Writers’ Trust / Writers Union / RBC Emergency Relief Fund; Canada Council’s short term, quick turn-around grant opportunities. CARFAC Saskatchewan offers a \$500 one-time grant for

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Laureen Marchand



Paul Seesequasis

visual artists in need. A Writers' Union survey estimates losses for writers, in the short term, of \$1.68 million with individual losses of \$3267. Other genres bear similar or greater hits to artists' fragile pocketbooks. The hand-outs are a stop-gap measure that likely will run out before arts and artists can recover.

While not an income generator, social media has drawn some artists and writers to show their work. But not everyone is comfortable with reinventing their mediums. Seesequasis says, "I've done a couple [Zoom], like for a book club. I just find it draining." Marchand notes, "I can't teach online.

Teaching art online is better if you can demonstrate and I don't. However, I've been posting, on Instagram and Facebook, images of local scenery and birds. It seems that people just want to see something nice."

Seesequasis wonders about the future. "The arts rely on actual human beings in a place – book signings, festivals, readings. How long will it take to rebound or recover? That remains to be seen." Laureen Marchand reflects: "I have no idea what the future will look like. In a year and a half which galleries will be left and how will they be operating?"

As with most artists, Paul and Laureen continue to create, though both admit that their production, even with ample time, has slowed. Marchand says: “Almost everyone I encounter is having fits and starts at best.” Seesequasis acknowledges: “Initially I was trying to be chill and not to feel bad if I didn’t do too much in a day. I’m getting better as time has gone on, saying this is the time I’ve set aside for this work, so I do it. The hardest part is losing that face to face contact, the chance to meet colleagues and talk about art and bounce ideas off each other.”

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Steven Ross Smith is a poet and arts writer. He has written for literary and arts publications across the country. Over three decades, he has crafted the innovative six-book poetic series *fluttermouth*. He has just completed a two-year term as Banff Poet Laureate. His work appears in print, audio and video in Canada, USA, and abroad. He lives and writes in Saskatoon.