



photo: Jamie-Lee Cormier
 Mur TREX Wall Art Gallery Grande Prairie
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Petites sagas from the collective Devenir
 Danièle, Karen, Doris, Sabine and Patricia
 as interpreted by ©Gisèle Villeneuve

On a stormy June evening, the five artists of the collective Devenir meet in Calgary to discuss the progress of their installation *Petites sagas*. They told me about that exhibition they are preparing for the Art Gallery of Grande Prairie’s TREX wall. They are creating a set of boxes as receptacles of their experience as francophone women in Alberta. Now that each of them has completed one box, would I like to join them so that I may compose a little saga of my own, based on my impressions of the project? “You bet! Here I come!” For me, the writer who arranges words into novels, short stories, essays or poetry, what a chance to interact with visual artists and see how they transform matter into story! While driving through heavy rain, I imagine! A cabinet of curiosities? Ship in a bottle? A pop-up book? The wonder of childhood in the hands of accomplished artists. I can’t wait to get there!

The clouds are thinning. Because they are scattered across Alberta, it’s always a rare pleasure to see Patricia, Sabine, Danièle, Karen and Doris all together. In the kitchen, the atmosphere is festive. The house cat claims the table as its territory.

Five identical white wooden boxes are lined up on the large table. For me, their similarity represents the collective. But as I examine the inside of each box, I encounter five perspectives and five techniques, testimony that each artist has an independent practice and a well-defined style. Nevertheless, since its foundation in 2016, the collective also represents a remarkable link of purpose and subject between the five women.

What are these little sagas? I listen to them: Images from the past. Our heritage. Shared and conflicting cultures. Wildlife in our cities. The elements. True stories, ambiguous retelling. Children's wanderings and found objects. Everything in this vast territory, they say, is a source of memories and stories. For them, an endless array of subjects for their treasure-trove theatres.



photo: Danièle Petit

Danièle shows me her work. **“Day of Plain”** is the vast land. The golden prairie, curiously sunny under a devastating summer storm. The infinite prairie and, in a surreal calm, tiny human structures trying to survive, anchored to the earth. The landscape seems to change before my eyes, as in a time-lapse sequence. “Because,” she tells me, “the plain suffers the moods of the sky. These are the mysteries of this great land carved by shadow and light.”

Thunderclap and sheets of rain. We burst out laughing!



photo: Karen Blanchet

Karen calls her series “**Our Wealth/Notre richesse**”. The box she shows me represents fire. Yes, forest fires are raging. Yet we marvel at the regenerative power of forests. “Fireweed blooms and new aspens push up from the ashes,” Karen reminds us. I gaze at the set design, the background dramatically recreating the glowing sky. And in the foreground, ironically, a campfire! Between these two zones, the vanishing point entices me deeper into the scene.

To compose my stories, I only have twenty-six letters at my disposal. And their infinite variety! Art installations are often designed with mixed media. What have you picked for your *Petites sagas*? Watercolour and acrylic, cardboard and wood, coloured or torn metallic paper, wire and plaster, ceramic and plastic. Just like nature, it seems to me, artists transform all that is at their disposal.



photo: Doris Charest

Actually, Doris beckons me over. Her memories growing up on the family farm near Falher continue to influence her imagination. Images of spending her childhood scouring the countryside for all sorts of things are still insistent. In that spirit, she calls her box “**The Den**”. Beneath the meadow with its immense sky, a landscape she has painted on the back of the box, I think I see objects that a child might have brought home. Rather, she explains, the scene is an old fox’s home. And young Doris and her friends were crawling down that abandoned earth looking for treasure. Ah, so I suppose the fox, like the pack rat of our mountains, is a collector of found objects. I try to guess what the objects in the box represent, but the cat leaps to the window. In the field across the street, a coyote. Its appearance derails the conversation.

To these women artists who have come here from different backgrounds, just as I have, I say: “You make Alberta your lead personage. Even if your studios are in Calgary, Edmonton and St. Albert, the whole territory is your canvas. And through your art, you know how to relate to each other.” And Sabine adds: “The concept of *Petites sagas* is to encapsulate the essence of our land’s history and heritage. For me, the deep history of the territory is a testament to the human experience of adaptation and integration.”



photo: Sabine Lecorre-Moore

And so for Sabine, the theme of her sculptures reflects what she calls “**Inhabitants and Habitants: Shared and Conflicting Cultures**”. Looking at the inside walls of her box, painted in autumnal watercolours, I immediately recognize Sabine’s signature. But right in the centre of the box is the lone white head of a bison. A plaster cast, like a death mask or sun-bleached bones. The bison, isolated from its herd. Bison scattered in the clash of cultures. The bison, now a museum piece. A sculpture made from wire covered in plaster of Paris. Sabine explains: “These materials, known for their fragility and timelessness, serve as metaphors for the ephemeral nature of life and the passage of time.”

On the table, the cat stretches before going to hide somewhere in the house, while through the window we see a bright beam of sunlight. While the concept of *Petites sagas* is about nature and culture shock, it is also about personal stories. Sometimes touching, sometimes tragic, these narratives evoke genuine sensitivity in both humans and animals.



photo: Patricia Lortie

Patricia introduces me to “La potière”, a story based on an actual event. I enter the meticulously detailed studio. The artist at her work table, surrounded by her ceramics and, behind her, a photo as a window. This artefact is crucial, because it’s the photo of the second box that forms the second part of Patricia’s story. “All day long,” she tells us, “the potter worked in her studio. She never turned to look out the window, never glanced at the woods where her husband was chopping trees. Not once.” Cliffhanger, then, like a novel in two volumes. And when the installation is complete, what will we see that the potter didn’t?

As I drive home, the heights of Calgary soak up the setting sun after the rain. And I think of our vast territory carved up into tiny *mise-en-scènes*. In *Petites sagas*, each artist has chosen to interpret in her own way the stories that have shaped Alberta’s past and continue to influence its present. The artists of the collective *Devenir* invited me, the writer, to a preview of their little theatres. Now they are inviting you, the visitors, to the exhibition, to give free rein to your imagination. To share your stories and to welcome the emotions their works awaken in you.

Gisèle

Calgary-based, Gisèle Villeneuve writes in French and in English. She has published novels, stories, essays and poetry, but she now prefers to mix and match literary genres. She studied art history and maintains a keen interest in contemporary art.

[Sabine Lecorre-Moore](#), [Patricia Lortie](#), [Karen Blanchet](#), [Doris Charest](#) and [Danièle Petit](#) founded the collective Devenir in 2016. Francophone women from different backgrounds, each calling Alberta home, they create a new project every two years, which contributes to the vitality of Franco-Albertan culture, while enriching their individual artistic practices. *Petites sagas* is their 14th exhibition.