

Artist Talk, June 28, 2018 at La Fab

My Story by Patricia Kenny

Elaine de Kooning, an abstract expressionist famously said, "A painting to me is primarily a verb, not a noun, an event first and only secondarily an image."

I imagine many of you have had events that changed you in some way, your outlook, your path, or provided clarity. It is this kind of moment and the transformation that follows that inspires me to delve into themes of vulnerability, survival, resilience and rebirth.

Thinking back in my own life to that kind of moment, it is March 2014, I am in Costa Rica, with an iron grip on these two small bars attached to a cable, ziplining. Looking down was a mile from the treetops and beside me was the Arenal volcano. Fueled by terror and exhilaration, I had one of those pivotal moments of understanding that I needed to take a leap of faith in my life.

Fourteen years prior to that moment. I was 40, with two small children, I left my home and moved temporarily in with my parents - after leaving the person I had known from the age of 19 who had spiraled into alcoholism and abuse. The ship was sinking, I couldn't save him but I needed to save my children and myself. Starting over, some days were so difficult that I would look down at my feet and literally tell myself to put one foot in front of the other. Keep going. The decision to start over was life altering and the experience of recovering and reclaiming our lives transformative.

Fast forward to 6 years later, on the other side, my wedding day, a second chance at love and partnership for me with 2 plus 2 children we were becoming a blended family. That moment was joyous and life altering and taking on the wonderful challenge of building this new family together was transformative in the most positive ways.

Five year later I am sitting in a doctor's office waiting to hear the results of a test. The moment I was told I had cancer was life altering, I felt the floor drop out from underneath me. In the 2 years that followed there were two surgeries, 6 months of chemo, 6 weeks of radiation, followed by soul searching, self-discovery, healing and transformation.

Which brings me to ziplining in Costa Rica, looking down at the trees far below and the volcano beside me realizing that life is full of these moments of terror and exhilaration. I had many years of taking care of others but in that moment of clarity, I knew that I needed to take care of myself, seize my time, be authentic to myself, find my voice, fulfill my own potential as an artist. And it was now or never.

I returned from this trip with a renewed resolve. Two months later, I am at an appointment in the morning with the diploma coordinator at the Ottawa School of Art showing him my portfolio for entry into the Fine Arts program. In the afternoon of the

same day I am at my mother's wake. A week later I gave notice at my job at Carleton University. By September the same year I started classes at the art school. I felt like I was finally surrounded by people who were like me. And my own metamorphosis and fulfillment began.

Firmly on this new path, with my partner's support, we decided to build a dedicated studio attached to our home. As construction unfolded over the course of several months I was super excited. Finally, we were days away from moving my art stuff out of a bedroom and into this wonderful new working space.

On April 20, 2016 the workers were at the final task of relocating the hydro. As they arrived in the morning with the backhoe, I headed down town to put up an exhibition called Once Upon a Time. As I was wrapping up I received a call from the construction company to tell me there was a minor incident. A fire started in the laundry room but it was under control.

I arrive on my street to find the way blocked by police cars. Firetrucks and people everywhere. Pointing to my house, I ask the police officer to please let me through, that is my house.

A completely surreal scene unfolds. The Red Cross handed us a blanket and toiletries and offered to put us up in a hotel for a few nights before being relocated. In a state of shock, we walk through the burned, charred, shell of a house. The reality slowing sinking in, we lost our pets, all our belongings, including decades of artwork. Life changing - the next 8 months were spent rebuilding and reclaiming our lives again.

Within days of the fire, a close friend, Charmaine, encouraged me to wander through the National Gallery with her. As we walked around, I was suddenly stopped in my tracks in front of a painting - feeling a wave of emotion, recognition and empathy - I told my friend, this painting feels just like walking through the ashen house. The painting, Charred Beloved was made 60 years ago by Arshile Gorky an abstract expressionist – after his studio burned and after having cancer. I was struck by this intermingling and connection that occurred between myself, the viewer and the energies layered in the work by the artist. This encouraged me forward to continue making abstract authentic, narrative works drawing inspiration from my own experiences as raw material, imprinting the energies of my journey in the work. Exploring the universality of transformative experiences through themes of vulnerability, survival, resilience and rebirth.

Sadly, Arshile Gorky very tragically succumbed to his own darkness, I hope for my story to be one of overcoming obstacles with hope and optimism for the future. One of light after darkness.