

**Susan Davis SAJD**

**A Hamilton Artists Inc. Member's Exhibition**

**A Body of Work**

**September 12 – October 4, 2009**

Susan Davis' work challenges popular representations of the human body. She depicts the human figure situated within familiar landscapes and in daily activity. The bodies depicted in these works often recline in traditional poses, but oppose obsessive expectations of contemporary culture and advertising regarding body type and age. Davis' work is informed by her studies in psychology, theology, fine art and medical art. In a very direct, empathetic, and unapologetic manner, the paintings confront the viewer's assumptions about the body. Evident in Davis' work is her interest in "the real, the particular" and the primacy of our bodies as environments. By expressing the body "as is", the works resist the element of fantasy and role playing encouraged by advertising. They exude a sense of self-acceptance which the viewer is invited to share. Altered landscapes function as metaphors for the cultural obsession with body alteration; as Davis notes, "We often fight the reality that we are in, which contains both a universal experience and a vulnerability." A particularly compelling work on this theme features a male nude seated on the stump of a decapitated tree in a clear cut with an industrial landscape rising in the background.

Beyond representation, painting for Davis is a method for seeing and for thinking. The physical enactment of painting is part meditation, part discipline. When describing the process of creating an artwork Davis speaks about the importance of being "as open as possible to the moment", accepting the particular situation of that moment rather than what 'could' or 'should' be. She notes that her painting requires a kind of continuity and endurance in its creation. Approaching her art as a constant learning process, Davis cites author Wendell Berry as an influence in her assumption of "not knowing" as a starting point for inquiry. Berry's insights into the paradox that a 'simple' life is complex for the individual living it, have greatly assisted Davis in acknowledging her inclination to be rooted in the locality of Hamilton and its regions, and in embracing voluntary simplicity as a manner of living. Health concerns, such as a childhood back injury and diabetes, initially started her on this path, and she calls her way of living "a lucky combination of ability and disability". It is no surprise that she finds further inspiration in the life and works of Cézanne, also diabetic, who lived in a physically restrictive manner, but whose works traversed expansive landscapes of colour and light.

Davis asserts that a spiritual context is essential to her work. Her interest in world religions has continued throughout her life, both through formal study and painting praxis. For her, it is essential to the creation of individual and world peace, a concern that is woven throughout the

work. Kandinsky stated in *Concerning The Spiritual in Art* that “The spiritual life, to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements, is a complicated but definite [...] movement forwards and upwards. This movement is the movement of experience. It may take different forms, but holds [...] to the same inner thought and purpose.”<sup>1</sup>. (Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Constable and Co. Ltd, London. 1914, p. 14.)

Davis lived the experience of being a woman creating figurative art in the 1970's, a period in which minimalism was at the forefront of artistic practice and feminism was at its beginnings. As a young woman artist she experienced several encounters in which women were believed to have less intellectual capacity, and notes that the artworld tends to be an environment of overcompensating masculinity. Davis remembers the difficulty in finding support for her work, and that as a serious woman artist, “...you were often the least welcome person in the room.” She explains that as a painter, there was and continues to be an over-emphasis on worth equated with the sale of work. Many of the skill-developing jobs that she had held in the past to support her practice, such as sign painting, typesetting, and calligraphy, have been replaced by the digital revolution. Davis states that there has also been such a decrease in demand and compensation for commissioned work of all kinds that it is almost impossible to recoup costs, creating a dire situation for anyone trying to apprentice themselves within the arts. She is concerned that the decline in these income sources together with that fact that an artist currently requires more financial means with which to maintain a studio and housing is making the prospects for developing artists very difficult. The maintenance of a supportive, local culture in Hamilton, therefore, becomes an even more urgent issue in terms of affordable housing and resources for artists, particularly since Hamilton is a “peripheral” city of a large urban centre, and is facing current and future gentrification processes.

After having the pleasure of working with Susan Davis over the last few months on this exhibition, as the staff at Hamilton Artists Inc. we have been inspired by both Davis' life and work. Having learned that through summer and into the late fall, Davis regularly swims at Burlington's Beachway Park on Lake Ontario, which she describes as “a world-class sand beach accessible by public transit” and Gulliver's Lake, a quarter mile stretch of clean, spring-fed water, I've been impressed by this image of her strength and vitality. Davis is an important contributor to a healthy local artist/ecology within Hamilton, and we are pleased to present this Member's Exhibition at Hamilton Artists Inc. over the months of September and October. An Artist Talk will occur at Hamilton Artists Inc. gallery, 161 James St North, October 4<sup>th</sup> from 2 - 4 pm with Susan Davis.

*Essay by Irene Loughlin*  
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