



Marsha Kennedy in her studio with some of her work in the background. (Photo by Gregory Beatty)

Marsha Kennedy on the importance of teaching and mentoring

By Gregory Beatty

On Nov. 19, Regina artist Marsha Kennedy received the Patrick Close Leadership in the Arts Award at CARFAC SASK's annual general meeting in Saskatoon. As a practicing artist, Kennedy has an extensive exhibition record dating back to the 1980s. One theme she's explored consistently is the often destructive interaction between humanity and nature. But she's also made a major contribution to the Saskatchewan arts community as a teacher and mentor.

Kennedy recently retired from the University of Regina, where she'd taught drawing and painting since 1991. Over the years, she's also participated in a number of formal and informal mentorship programs. In her Saskatoon acceptance speech, she spoke of her strong belief in the importance of teaching and mentorship. And that was the focus of our conversation when we met in late November.

Does anyone stand out as an important teacher or mentor when you were developing as an artist?

Robert Betteridge was my high school art teacher. Even in kindergarten, I was interested in art. But I didn't really have a teacher who specialized in art until him. Then I went to the Central Collegiate art program, and Mac Hone was another influence. Unlike many high school students, I paid a lot of attention to what they were doing and saying, so they did inspire me. In university, Jack Cowin supported

me and I started out as a printmaker. But in terms of connection, it started to become other students. Then as you mature, you get to meet more artists. There haven't been a lot of close relationships, but there have been some, and that's where you also have a friendship. Something clicks, and they're open and receptive enough to share. John Noes-theden, when he was at the university, we were really good art buddies. That was a wonderful relationship, as we could really get down to some nitty gritty things.

You've been both a teacher and mentor. Do you think that helped you develop skills that served you in both capacities?

One thing that happens when you're a teacher is you're in a situation where you have to find the skills to connect with people you don't necessarily feel inclined to connect with. Some students are open and easy, and some walk in at the beginning of the semester and they look closed. It required me, as I grew up, to learn how to communicate better with people, and become more compassionate and get over trying to be a perfectionist about teaching my subject.

When I was in school, education was a lot different, teachers were different. They didn't really care how you felt, or what was going on in your head. There was a different kind of authoritarian teaching going on. It's not like that at all today. There are a lot of good things about that, because teacher and student can meet each other and have a conversa-

tion. Rather than be an authority, the teacher tries to listen very hard to what the student is saying that can help them in their practice. Listening is really important, especially now that our classroom time has been cut back. It maybe takes longer to build those relationships, but they do happen.

Is it true also that each class has its own character, so you have to be flexible?

Sometimes a project will work really well for one class, and not so well for another class. So it's an environment where you do have to pay attention to individuals. If I talk to a student, and I sense resistance to an assignment, I'll think "What's the point?" and try to find a way they can do it more their way yet still get what I need them to get out of that.

Everyone wins that way, whereas mentoring is all about what the mentee wants — or what they think they want. So there's a lot more talking, and a more intense relationship in getting to know each other. Sometimes it doesn't matter whether you're talking about personal things or art things. Wherever the help and support needs to go, that's where you give it. Mentorships are as individual as we all are. Everyone needs something different, everyone's at a different phase in their life and career. But the fact they stepped in and wanted to do it in the first place is an indication that they have a strong desire and you're there to support that.

With students, I imagine one key transition is when they graduate and are looking to start their professional career. That can be a scary time.

Whenever I bring in someone to talk to my students I always get them to talk about how it works for them, and how they manage to hold an art-related job or any job and still make art. Students not only like to hear those stories, they need to hear them because they're soon going to be out there.

I also teach the professional issues course. So we go to the CARFAC office, and do things like visit local galleries and the Saskatchewan Arts Board to open the community up to them. As long as they have confidence when they leave they can continue, but it's a challenge. I recall going through it myself. That's where mentoring can help, because it takes awhile, and the cost of living is so high now, so it's hard for students to work and save time in their schedule for making art. I think young artists need that support, because it often doesn't come from family. You can support them with practical things, like advice on a grant application or a studio visit, but also just reassure them.

What about the value of mentorship for established artists?

I've been a mentee under Gary Robins because I wanted to learn some photography and Photoshop skills. That was a new medium for me, and I think

at any age it's okay to do that. In fact, I enjoyed it so much I wouldn't hesitate to apply again if there was something I needed to learn. I have worked with some mentees where it wasn't very productive, but I still feel the mentorship was good because there was more emphasis on setting up one's life to accommodate being an artist and making sure you get the right support system in place. Then sometimes an artist just wants feedback on what they're doing, and a richer or deeper discussion on their work and where it could go. It maybe allows them to dig deeper into ideas that they've thought about but haven't taken to heart.

A lot of times an artist might be working on something, and they're not aware of issues that are in the work. I walk in and I see them right away. I think all artists need that, really. More mature artists won't necessarily change their content that much, and may not be interested in that. But an artist who moves through different ideas a lot, or younger artists who are trying to figure out what they're interested in or dig deeper into their interests — for them, mentoring is really helpful.

Do you ever worry, as a teacher or mentor, about being overly prescriptive in how you engage with students or mentees?

My work has a didactic quality to it. I'm always trying to show people things I want them to see and think about because they're important. Sometimes I tread carefully that way, because you can't say things before they're ready to be heard. You need to get to know someone, have conversations with them, then gently show them things. If you can see the person has the capability of doing that you want to get them moving along because the most important work in my life has been work that is thoughtful and has something to say and isn't just decorative. I do try to get them to make work that's authentically theirs though. You can tell when an artist has that.

We might think of teaching and mentorship as being a one-way street, with the teacher/mentor imparting knowledge. But do you feel you've also benefited as an artist/person from that engagement?

If I'm with someone who really likes to talk about art and ideas I'm really happy because I love doing that. I really like going to galleries with other people too. You can spend some time by yourself, but you can bounce ideas off each other. I mentored Sarah Cummings Truszkowski last year, and whenever we'd go to a gallery we'd always end with "What was your favourite work?" It was kind of a joke, but we always picked one. It was silly, but also "Okay, why did you pick that one?" Often, you are drawn to one work, then you try to figure out why. So we enjoy sharing that. I would actually like to do that more with artists.