

Acclaimed artist Helen Lucas finds beauty in nature



By Brock Weir

Growing up in Saskatoon in the 1930s and 40s, first generation Canadian Helen Lucas grew up in very strict Greek family. Her friends in school were a little bit too fast for her conservative parents' liking ? after all, they wore lipstick, and some of them even dated!

By her own admission, Ms. Lucas grew up as a ?loner? who often took solace outdoors, helping her mother tend the beautiful garden at The Ritz, the unlikely name of a 25-room hotel in the Saskatchewan city her father happened to win in an all-night poker game. ?My parents came from a remote mountain village in Greece,? she recalls. ?They had no church, no school, no nothing there; just trees for grapes that they would ship off to the big city. That was their survival. If there was any space left over, it was for vegetables, so my mother had this wonderful front garden here in Canada.?

Flowers were a significant part of her formative years, but it was decades before they would become her life's work. Now 87, Helen Lucas is an artist acclaimed worldwide for her vivid depictions of flowers and a retrospective her work is now on at the Aurora Cultural Centre through December 29.

Entitled ?Why Do I Paint Flowers?? the exhibition serves to answer that very question, and Ms. Lucas doesn't shy away from elaborating on her answer.

?When I graduated from OCAD, I was a figurative painter and had done a lot of work and shows overseas,? says the King-based artist. ?One day, I was working on a figurative work with blue paint and the paint wasn't moving the way I wanted, so I threw down my brush and was doing it by hand. When I took off my hand, there was the most incredible image in the paint. It was like a hand, but it had other shapes and lines going up and down. I looked and all I could see was a flower. There was nothing else that could be that intricate and beautiful.?

Hit with a brainstorm, Ms. Lucas rushed to her local florist and asked for some irises. The florist checked their stock and came out with a prime specimen.

?I said, ?Oh, my god! They're beautiful! I have never seen anything like it!' and the florist probably thought I was crazy. She asked, ?Madam, how many would you like.' I said, ?Three.' ?Three dozen?' she asked. No, just three. So, I bought three and just came home.?

The number three plays a big part in Ms. Lucas' life. A religious woman ? ?I'm 87, so it is good to be in good terms! ? she has used the mantra of ?Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? as her mantra whenever she has felt anxious.

?It got to a point about eight years ago when I was saying that more and more, so I narrowed it down to just the word ?three' and now everything I do relates to ?three' ? no painting in this exhibition took more than three days to complete.' That has become my magic number.?

If ?three? is her magic number, the sunflower might just be her talisman.

Over her decades of work, Ms. Lucas' name has become almost synonymous with the imposing, beautiful yellow flower. She's

comfortable with the association, counting the species as her favourite.

'There is something very spiritual about sunflowers, especially when you see the really big ones,' she says, noting she's currently working on a painting depicting rows upon rows of sunflowers reminiscent of the undulating fields of France. 'Flowers are as old as ancient man and each came up on their own. Each flower is different, they then seed themselves and grow and grow. I think flowers are important, as important almost as man.

'I hope people leave the gallery with some joy and maybe connect with some of that spiritual feeling. While flowers don't last for long, I try to paint that beauty to last. I want them to have a memory,' she adds, confiding that her greatest number of commissions these days come from mothers who bring her their daughters' wedding bouquets to be immortalized in paint. 'I just paint the memory of their beauty and that's what people want to take away. Flowers are joyous and a gift from the Lord. We should enjoy them, knowing that life is fleeting.'