

# Through the Looking Glass

## RACHEL VADEBONCOEUR: AN ARTIST'S LIFE

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GAYLE MAVOR

**S**harp shiny pieces of broken glass handed over from one artist to another await cleaning, inspiration and repurposing in Spitfire Artwork's studio located behind and under the co-operative Salt Spring Gallery. Glass pieces melted together at 1500 degrees Fahrenheit emerge fused, sometimes as happy accidents, from one of two kilns. Vive la différence!

These are the artistic realities of creator Rachel Vadeboncoeur, 60, a lifelong artist and a longtime Salt Spring resident. She shape-shifts champagne bottles, excising the words "Karma" and "Truth" into the new piece. There are crystal candy dishes cut in half, broken family heirlooms, half-litre wine carafes, a glossy purple grape cluster found in a garbage bin, glass cast-offs from fellow glass artist Bob Leatherbarrow and even the 100-year-old brittle glass from the windows of a Montreal synagogue.





Above, from left: In Between; Bird of Paradise.

Below: The Seven Secrets of Anna, created for Anna Haltrecht's dance studio.

Page 27: Rachel Vadeboncoeur with her Embracing Transformation piece at Salt Spring Gallery.

As observer, it's figuring out what used to be, examining found objects of various thicknesses, and the surprise of eventual recognition, that adds to the intrigue of her pieces. She describes the process as assemblage or 3D collage.

"Stained glass is known as a flat medium," she says. "I have fun creating a third dimension."

Rachel's approach to her art reflects her quirky, warm and whimsical personality. She isn't afraid to experiment. A Taste of Blue, for example, is a wildly weird blue bottle with oddly shaped pink glass fitting into it like a flattened freeze frame of petrified cotton candy. While not to everyone's taste, or even comprehension, it's a conversation piece for sure. Her work ranges from large commissioned windows, stained glass, glass sculptures, fused glass bowls, framed fused glass and a variety of earrings, necklaces and brooches.

Six of her pieces purchased by a U.S. medical doctor and avid art collector now adorn his Salt Spring greenhouse, framed by thriving tomato vines.

"A glass window, like, at this time of the day is one thing," she says. "Later this afternoon, when the sun is shining through, it's another. When it's front lit at night, it's another thing. It has caché. It's always a different piece depending on the light."

It's not been possible to separate art from life. Her childhood paintings were the subject of Dix-Sept Tableaux D'enfant, a book written by her father, a well-known Québec labour leader and essayist, Pierre Vadeboncoeur, who died in 2010. The book, published in 1991, was popular enough to warrant two reprints.

"He thought I wasn't quite painting like a child. He analyzes the drawings and finds quite a lot of words to put beside

those drawings," she describes with modesty in her characteristic thick Québécois accent.

Her parents were part of the cultural Who's Who in Québec during the Quiet Revolution. Her mother, Marie Gaboury, born in Ontario, is perfectly bilingual, trained as a social worker and did translations while raising five children. Her father, educated as a lawyer, wrote 29 books and various articles in Cité Libre, the political journal he collaborated on with his childhood friend, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, and others.

Pierre Vadeboncoeur was one of only a few of his friends who weren't arrested during the October Crisis (1970). "I remember 24/7 surveillance on our house. I was 15 years old. We were pretending to make bombs out of paper bags and prancing in front of the windows."

Rachel also remembers Trudeau visiting their summer cottage. "He was doing triple back flips off the diving board. One time, just after he was elected prime minister, the media asked him if he would give up his Mercedes and he responded, 'Which one, the car or the girl?'"

She grew up in St. Hilaire and then lived in Outremont, attending École Noël, what she believes is the first alternative primary school in Canada created by Jacques Hébert, her father and others. She remains connected to those school mates whom she still sees every time she visits Montreal and credits the school's philosophy of cooperation for their strong relationships.

Montreal looms large in her memories, especially the scenes from a coffee shop/natural food coop named Matin des Magiciens.

"Musicians jammed all night and some





At right, from top: Books by Rachel's father Pierre Vadeboncoeur; a collage Rachel made that highlights a quote from her father.



people that started Cirque du Soleil hung out. We were paid in coupons. There was no money. We organized two or three street fairs, taking a truck of sand to make a beach in the middle of Montreal. It was an amazing time."

Contact with her family was limited. "They would have preferred me to have a straighter, linear life," she says, laughing.

Rachel's first paid work as an artist, through Perspectives Jeunesse, came straight out of high school at 17. She painted three large murals in a college cafeteria. Batik and silk were her initial passions, but glass kept sneaking in. In the early 1980s, she sold batik scarves, blouses and picture frames after Françoise Saliou, the owner of La Pierre de Lune, a renowned glass shop in Montreal, kindly shared some space with her. Saliou, she says, is probably one of three glass artists in the world who had the skills to restore some Tiffany windows as part of the 2010 international show called Tiffany Glass: A Passion for Colour. Seventeen of those windows are now part of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

She is the only one in her family to leave Québec, which she did 32 years ago.

"I'm the princess in exile," she says. Following a guy brought her west. They sailed and lived all over the coast but kept returning to Salt Spring. Along the way she acquired boat-building and fibreglassing skills.

She describes her younger years as "pretty wild." While she declines to get specific, she does share a tragic story of Manu, a son born when she was just 19 years old, who was killed by a car on a remote rural road in South Durham, Que. He was 28 months old.

"Those are wounds that never heal," but now as a grandmother to five grandchildren, she says, "I am still mommying a lot of people."

She was married two years ago in a small ceremony to her partner of 16 years, Robert Fielder, a marine mechanic at Harbours End Marine.

The dream to open her own shop became a reality on Salt Spring via The Crow's Nest, (where Rendezvous Patisserie is now located), a space she ran for six years, partnering for three with Seneca Lalonde, also a glass artist, and because Barry Edwards, the former owner of Moby's Pub, gave her a sweet deal on rent. Since 1999, she has been the curator of art for Salt Spring's Island Savings branch. She hangs three to four shows a year, picking from Salt Spring artists as she desires. In 2003, she attended Espace VERRE, a glass-blowing and glass-arts school in Montreal where she learned advanced glass techniques, although she says that the technical aspects of glass are still challenging for her.

In her studio sits a beautiful commissioned window, whose vibrant reds and greens come alive in the light. It was done for Anna Haltrecht's new dance studio.



"I had a photograph of Anna dancing with a big red skirt . . . She wanted her mom's jewellery integrated and a few kitty paws, but then she gave me free rein. I have enough experience to do commissions, but I need people to understand that while I do consider their opinions in creating the piece, I'm not the type that will submit a drawing and go back and forth. They have to believe in me. It will be a Rachel!" she adds with a laugh and a flourish of her arm.

And with that, a quote from her father, immortalized in a collage in her studio, seems to fit perfectly: "Art is like the mark of a higher being among common and immediate realities."

Her work can be seen at her studio and at Salt Spring Gallery, where she has been a member since 2009.

Visit Rachel's website: [rachelvadeboncoeur.weebly.com](http://rachelvadeboncoeur.weebly.com).

