

Lifeworks

In the silent hours: the cancer paintings of Kelly Clark

Physicians who work in palliative care often witness the healing that occurs in the midst of pain and suffering. But few people are able to leave a visual legacy of their end-of-life experience. Canadian artist Kelly Clark was such a person. The series of paintings he created in the last six months of his life as he confronted laryngeal cancer records a remarkable journey from inner terror to serenity. The contrast between the first and last paintings in his *Cancer Series* is profound and

inspirational. Arising from personal suffering, they achieve transcendence nonetheless. Describing the inspirational quality of Clark's work, Arthur Adamson alludes to the aesthetic vision of William Blake, for whom art was a meeting-point of the human and the divine:

The divine is the core of our humanity. It is what art *must* express. ... It is largely intuitive, not consciously willed. It is certainly not determined by what is in vogue.¹

George Swinton, a teacher, mentor and friend, describes Kelly as "what I like to call a 'narrative artist' (even when he tried to be abstract) as his work depended on perceiving, transmuting or envisioning any matter encountered or imagined."² Certainly, Kelly's commitment as an artist was to explore and honestly express what he perceived and experienced.

Kelly Clark was born in St. Vital in 1935, when that suburb of Winnipeg still marked the edge of the open prairie. After receiving his diploma in fine arts from the University of Manitoba's School of Art, he continued his pursuit of visual art in London, England, for four years. During this time, a Canada Council grant allowed him the privilege of studying under the Austrian expressionist Oskar Kokoschka in Salzburg for six weeks in the summer of 1962. But Manitoba remained his home. He was the art director of *Omphalos*, an alternative Winnipeg newspaper, from 1969 until it merged with the *Manitoban* in 1970, and of *Canadian Dimension* from 1969 until 1989, with the exception of 5 years spent living in a cabin at the Delta Marsh, during which he worked exclusively on his art.

Kelly Clark was diagnosed with laryngeal cancer in early October 1993 and received 20 fractions of radiotherapy during the next two months. It took him three months to recover from the side-effects of treatment. But, given the 95% cure rate of people with localized laryngeal cancer, his odds of survival seemed good.

Kelly had maintained a studio in the Ryan Building in downtown Winnipeg, just behind the offices of *Canadian Dimension* magazine, since 1969. From 1987, he and his wife were able to live in the floor above in exchange for custodial work. But, in February of 1994, just as Kelly was regaining his strength, the building was sold; he had only one month to vacate his studio of 25 years, and two months to vacate the roof-top apartment.

Artists studios become storehouses of history: artifacts of the past often are



Kelly Clark, 1995. CANCER DRAWING NO. 3 — THE SILENCE OF THE SCREAM · FEB · 8 · 1995 · Mixed media on paper. 23" x 17.5"

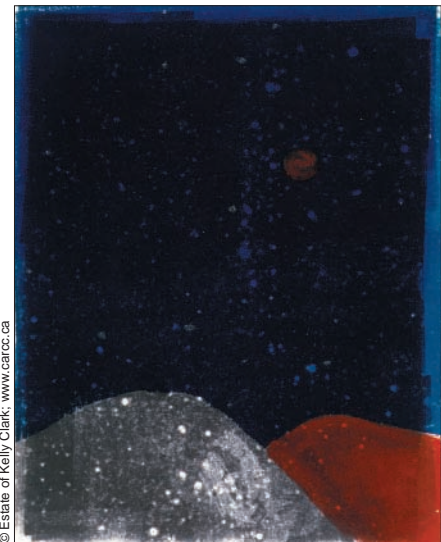
recycled in the present and become resources for the future, reflecting the continuum of life, thought and ideas. Every nook and cranny of Kelly's studio was filled with prints, paintings, art supplies, and works in progress. Finding a home for a lifetime's work was daunting. Without financial resources, and still vulnerable from the aftermath of Kelly's diagnosis and treatment, being evicted from their home in the middle of a Manitoba winter was more than the Clarks could have survived without the support of close friends (who helped them through three major transitions to salvage the art). The relief of finding studio space in another Winnipeg warehouse was short lived. By June of 1994, Kelly began losing weight and found that he was short of breath when he walked up stairs. This would be remembered as a time of "personal holocaust." A long-time friend was shocked by Kelly's cadaverous appearance. In July, after many visits for follow-up care, he was admitted to hospital for investigation. A full workup, culminating in a surgical consult and

biopsy, revealed a recurrence of his cancer. He had three days to decide if he would undergo an emergency laryngectomy. Discussing his decision to consent to surgery, he said, "I'm not ready to die yet, and aside from that, how could I ever explain this!"

During the last eight months of his life, Clark was in realistic fear of suffocating. He endured suctioning, repeated trips to the emergency department, a month of tube-feeding necessitated by the development of a fistula at the surgical site, and one surgical revision, in October 1994, to enlarge his stoma. Ultimately, although the cancer had been removed, the radiation therapy had affected his ability to heal. His stoma refused to remain open.

For Kelly, the loss of his voice meant the loss of an important part of his identity. Trained as an artist, he had also been active in Winnipeg's folk music scene in the 1950s. Although he never healed enough to learn esophageal speech, with the support of a sensitive and dedicated speech therapist he became quite adept at communicating through an electrolarynx. Six months after the laryngectomy, in early 1995, Clark was able to execute his *Cancer Self-Portraits*, a triptych that expressed the difficulty of his decision to undergo such radical surgery and that became the foundation of his *Cancer Series*. In March, in his last letter to his six sisters, he wrote about these images: "I think they originate in a deeper part of my soul than I have ever explored in the past."

Another hiatus in his work followed. Then, on April 27, having once again reclaimed a working space in the midst of chaos, Kelly completed the first five of a series of volcano images. The exact dates of his remaining works are unknown — with the exception of his last painting



Kelly Clark, 1995. UNTITLED (*Kelly's Final Choice*). Mixed media; printer's ink, stencil, monoprint on paper. 23" x 17.5"

(above), completed a few hours before his death in the early hours of June 2, 1995. That night, he had taken down all his other art and left his final painting hanging, his last gift to the world.

In their expression of the transformation possible in times of suffering, the works of Kelly Clark challenge us to face the difficulties in life. In the limited time he had to complete his work, he demonstrated that healing is a life-long process. For those who are facing similar struggles, it may bring some comfort to contemplate the work of someone who has journeyed before them from inner darkness to a place of peace.

**Janice Mulder
Janet Clark**
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Janice Mulder is a palliative care physician; Janet Clark is the wife of the artist and executor of the Kelly Clark Estate.

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References

1. Adamson A. The human dimension of his art. In: Swinton G, Adamson A, Johnson D. *Kelly Clark*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1998. p. 10.
2. Swinton G. Kelly's artmaking. In: Swinton G, Adamson A, Johnson D. *Kelly Clark*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1998. p. 7-9.



Kelly Clark, 1995. THE DESPERATE NEED (*Cancer Series: Letraset #1*). Mixed media monoprint on oriental paper. Signed and dated, Clark · April · 1995 · 24" x 18"