

the world while studying medicine. “You’re only young once. Go and see Venice before it sinks.”

“You get to my stage all too quickly,” said my most-published professor, as though my annual colonoscopy awaits upon convocation.

My medical friends, however, always understood. But now that my classmates are scattered in the hospi-

tal, we see each other less and less. All too often, we could name what each other had for breakfast, the order in which we would appear late for class, the subjects we skipped, the topics that stressed us out. Now, everyone sees the end of the tunnel: going to long-awaited electives, finding references, writing case reports, figuring things out.

There is anticipation. We are all, in a sense, ready to leave, but in truth much less certain of what we are leaving for.

**Farrah Mateen**

Medical Student  
College of Medicine  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon, Sask.

*Lifeworks*

## Visionary gifts

Visual art exists in the physical moment when the viewer stands before the work. But it also generates a psychological or intellectual moment that the viewer captures as memories in the mind’s eye.

This is certainly true of *Nancy Edell: Selected Works, 1980–2004*, a retrospective exhibition that was on view at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (AGNS) from Oct. 2, 2004, to Jan. 2, 2005. There are plenty of moments one might wish to relive in this impressive selection of 78 works, which took up the whole of the third floor at the AGNS.

Curated by Ray Cronin, a friend and former student of Edell’s at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, the exhibition’s sheer volume and extensive timeline demanded return visits; this reviewer enjoyed two repeat viewings. Over the 24 years covered by the show, Edell, a native of Nebraska who has lived in Nova Scotia since the 1980s, used a variety of materials and processes to chart one important aspect of her sense of self: changes experienced in her own body over the years.

In the 1980s the artist learned to hook rugs, a traditional domestic activity in the Maritimes. Edell’s works, however, are not the expected folksy coastal scenes. Instead, her depictions often invert the socially constructed roles women play in the home. For example, in *Home Entertainment* (1984), a topless woman wears a child’s blow-up toy around her waist. With her head

covered by a bathing cap and shrouded by a halo, she stands over a hooded, naked man crawling toward her. This is not the family heirloom your grandmother passed down. Cronin refers to Edell’s work as “contrarian because she’s positing a different view,” though she does so without an agenda and without anger.

In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, Edell started to use different processes and materials that altered her use of imagery and form even as her theme remained the same: how the body changes over time, and how that

change governs self-image. Whereas the woman in *Home Entertainment* appears playful, sexual, confident and vital in her younger years, the 1988 work *Royal Family in Point Pleasant Park* provides an interesting contrast.

This diptych combines monotype printmaking, drawing and found objects, namely paper dolls. This is an abstracted view of the popular park: against a nocturnal background Edell draws a woman who stands cradling a cat. (Like Edell, the woman has bobbed red hair and wears round glasses, a visage that appears occasion-



**Nancy Edell, *Syncoryne Mirabilis* (2004).** Mixed media on plywood and hooked rug. 216 cm x 360 cm.

ally in Edell's work.) Dressed in ordinary clothes, she regards the well-groomed paper-doll royal children almost in pity. Are they comfortable in their own skin, she seems to ask. This is no longer the woman in *Home Entertainment*; this woman is more tired and forlorn.

Our perceptions of our roles are altered as our bodies change and break down with age. This is the unavoidable truth at the heart of arguably the most powerful works in this show: the mixed-media pieces of the last few years. These pieces, Cronin explains, are "not linear narratives" or scenes. They are like dreams. (Indeed, her mixed-media technique allows the artist to combine the iconic and recognizable with the fantastic and abstract.)

In the late 1990s Edell was building toward the dreamscapes of her mixed-media work. In *Spiracle II* (1998) she created a hooked rug, but instead of a scene with representative figures — a man and woman — the rug depicts a broken tablet. On the tablet are a variety of diverse but thematically linked

forms: an insect, a larva sprouting human legs, another vessel.

Now the playfulness and pleasure of the youthful body is replaced by a more philosophical — older and wiser perhaps — body image. There's a sense of acceptance, even celebration, to *Spiracle II*, which is certainly a brighter note than the Royal Family piece.

A new corporeal reality set in when Edell was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. The disease forced her to leave her teaching position at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 2002, but she has continued with studio work. During this phase the dreamlike mixed-media pieces have fully emerged.

"In the end, they're celebrations of survival," says Ray Cronin of the recent works. Edell's most recent work included in the show is *Syncoryne Mirabilis* (2004). This is also her largest, notes Cronin. The increased scale adds a sense of permanence, as if to say, "I think, therefore I am, and I'm not going anywhere."

In this piece the viewer recognizes "mutating, larval forms," as Cronin calls them: insects and paper dolls along with flora, fauna, horizon lines of sky and ocean and two abstract female forms. It is a densely layered work, a chaotic collage. Every inch of the surface is covered.

Cronin offers a metaphor for this current period of Edell's work: "Nancy is making visible the [internal] visualization strategies you're taught when you're ill," he says. One can imagine that *Syncoryne Mirabilis* is what anyone fighting a disease may see in the mind's eye as he or she tries to build strength.

Similarly, *Port-o-Cath* (2003) seems to be, Cronin says, "floating in liquid." For this piece, Edell paints with oils on plywood, but she adds hooked-rug elements to extend out opposite corners of the work and cuts out and adds pieces of AstroTurf to the plywood surface. She paints on nerve endings and cellular matter. A catheter snakes through the middle of the piece.

Depending on your current experience, this work may either unnerve or steel you. For Edell, Cronin says, it's the latter: "The medical imagery is Nancy coming to terms with her body and its breaking down."

Edell has inspired at least one other artist. Audrey Nicoll, a Nova Scotian painter and writer, knew Edell as a textile artist but was overwhelmed by the materially diverse and intense nature of the AGNS show. The work prompted Nicoll to return to her own studio with a renewed vigour and the courage to "balance the dark and the light" in her own life. Nicoll was recently diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

"Her [Edell's] work exemplifies the complexity of an individual's thoughts and interests and seems to reject the notion of simple answers or questions," Nicoll says.

Simple but nagging questions like "Why me?" plague us all, but seem especially virulent when we are ill, Nicoll says. "Until one personally faces that kind of health challenge, disease seems terrifying, but sometimes — for me anyway — it provides strange gifts and insights and really forces a person to embrace life as a whole experience and to live everything very intensely."

If Nancy Edell's work teaches us anything, it's to live intensely — that is, to meet every change and challenge in ourselves, no matter how dire, without fear.

**Sean Flinn**  
Freelance Writer  
Halifax, NS

*Nancy Edell: Selected Works 1980–2004* will be touring to other cities in Canada; dates to be confirmed. For the latest information check the AGNS Web site at [www.agns.gov.ns.ca](http://www.agns.gov.ns.ca). The exhibition catalogue, *Nancy Edell Selected Works/Oeuvres Choies 1980–2004* contains essays by Ray Cronin, AGNS Curator of Contemporary Art, and by Jan Allen, artist and essayist. It is available at the AGNS shop or online at [www.ABCartbookscanada.com](http://www.ABCartbookscanada.com).



**Nancy Edell. *Spiracle II* (1998).**  
Hooked rug 175.5 x 124.5 cm. Collection of Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery.