IN THE STUDIO

an interview with artist Pamela Allen

by Marney K. Makridakis

I was first introduced to Pamela Allen’s vivacious art when I participated in an assemblage workshop she taught at the 2002 Artiology conference (www.artiology.com). Take one glimpse at her Web site and you’ll see how wildly varied her work is (http://pamelart.homestead.com/titlepage.html). Moving freely between painting, collage, assemblage, fabric arts, prints, and more, the Canadian artist puts a strong emphasis on the narrative element in her work...making her the perfect artist to interview for Artella! I hope you enjoy this romp into Pamela’s art and stories!

MM: Your Web site says that 25 years ago, you quit your job and went to art school. What was the impetus for deciding to go to art school?

PA: I was painfully aware at the age of about thirty that I did NOT want to spend the rest of my life staring down a microscope all day even though the money WAS good -- I was a lab tech! In grade nine, the guidance counselor had asked me what I wanted to do “when I grew up”. I had answered, “Be an artist”. She then said, “No...I mean what do you REALLY want to do?” And therefore I never took art in school. But there it was, I WAS grown up and looking for a better life so art was the obvious choice.

MM: While growing up, what courses did you most connect with in school?

PA: I must have been a malleable little plop of silly putty in secondary school as I was streamlined into the academic tract with Latin, History, French, Math, Sciences and English. To be fair to myself, I had skipped two grades and arrived in high school a little skinny 12-year-old! I was dreadful at maths and sciences but loved the more liberal arts subjects.

MM: Your work represents so many different media. Do you tend to focus on working in a single medium at a time...i.e., creating mostly paintings, creating only assemblages, etc? Or do you work on many different varied projects at a time?

PA: At the beginning of my art career, I did only painting. After about 6 years and with many episodes of artist’s block, I decided to explore other media just to keep working when the painting was going badly. I had the idea that working in another medium was temporary -- therefore I wasn’t as neurotic about the final result. Lo and behold, this seemed to be the key to relaxing into a much wider subject matter...more personal and meaningful to me. I became much more productive and was having a lot more fun too! Funnily enough, as I look over the whole 20 years of work there seems to be a common thread throughout despite the apparent jumps from one medium to another.
PA (continued): Right now I’m working mainly in fabric constructions, but still do assemblage and the odd collage. All of these seem related to me as I tend to work by accumulation...starting with one idea which spawns another and another. All three media use found objects and recycled materials, too.

I DO generally work on more than one thing at a time sort of dovetailing one project into another...that way I never have to come to the studio and start from scratch!

MM: What is the role of “story” or “narrative” in your work? Does narrative have a different role depending on the medium in which you’re working?

PA: Narrative or, at the very least, figurative references are very important, in that a piece has to have a personal meaning for me in order for it to maintain my interest. I do tend to create little scenarios as the work unfolds and progress is often determined by the “story” that is taking shape. In fabric work, the narrative may also be obvious to the viewer; in assemblage it’s more hidden, due to the nature of the materials and method.

MM: Take me through the process of how a new project begins. Does it start with an idea? A story? The materials, themselves?

PA: The materials, of course, do determine the outcome somewhat, but I think the thought process is the same no matter what I work with. In fabric, for instance, I will just sew together a bunch of fabrics in interesting colors, and there is my “canvas”, so to speak. I do figures of women mostly, as that is a subject that I KNOW and that interests me. So I might place a figure somewhere on the background made of other fabric scraps. But these have to relate to the back and placement on the ground may determine that another figure is required, or some reference to an environment.

A story starts unfolding in my mind at this point, and the figure begins to identify herself...like it might be an Eve figure...which will require an apple tree (I’m very literal!), and a GOD figure...and maybe some editorial comment on original sin...which leads to putting the apple tree on wheels because all women take the damned thing with us wherever we go! Once the composition is complete, I can then indulge my penchant for decorative pattern and embellishment, either by adding beads, or wheels or by fancy quilting. And VOILA! I have “Eve Escaping from the Garden”.

Eve Escaping from the Garden, fabric collage, 34” x 44"
(In the Studio, cont.)

MM: At Artiology last year, it intrigued me to hear you talk about the trend in collage and assemblage now, using all the “standard” ephemera that isn’t necessarily related to a narrative. Can you speak on this a bit?

PA: Yes, I’m afraid I can get on a bit of a tirade about this. There is a huge upsurge of creativity going on now, helped by many magazines and cyber groups as well as art retreat sorts of weekends. It pains me, though, to see a lot of energy expended on a kind of generic “look” that is popular in the arts/crafts movement. I’m talking about stamping, collaging, journalling, etc. All of which are wonderful vehicles for creativity but alas, so often end up as a lovely decoration as opposed to a personal expression.

MM: In your opinion, then, what makes a piece of artwork provocative?

PA: If a work of art attracts me, it’s usually because the hand and heart of the artist is evident. It can be revealed by narrative content, or a quirky choice of materials, or a certain edginess that keeps the viewer off balance, and therefore interested. The artist has to be willing to take risks, look into herself, and not worry too much about style. Once you have that confidence, more formal matters of composition, colour, structure, balance, rhythm all come with practice and experience.

MM: You’ve been a wonderful contributor to Artella, and have allowed several writers to respond creatively to your work (“Copper Goddess” and “Two Sisters Flying a Kite” in Artella issue 1, and “Queen Bee” in this issue of e-Artella). Could you share a bit about this experience?

PA: It has been quite a revelation to see in print the responses of other artists to my work. I have always said that it’s the viewers’ job to find their own meaning from a work of art...even though the artist’s may be entirely different. Your writers’ responses have revealed MORE about myself than even I was aware of. I looked again at my work and discovered some underlying (dare I say Freudian) messages that certainly weren’t my intention but ARE there nevertheless.

MM: Have you had any other experiences in which you worked with creative writers in any way?

PA: I was commissioned by a publisher to do a cover for a novel once. Of course I had to read the book...and it was AWFUL! Very pedestrian language and a really dumb story! I did the best I could with it, though! I also did a series of prints a long time ago for a small but classy poetry publication/magazine. I remember they were all on the theme of “bugs” and somehow fit quite nicely with the poems surrounding them. But then, I LIKE bugs!

MM: Have you, or do you, experiment with writing, yourself? Have you ever written about your own artwork?

PA: I confess I can talk a good talk, but have very little writing to my credit. I did a digital collage project a few years ago on the subject of alienation. A collage and poem to accompany it. I quite like it, too! But have not toyed with that muse since. (see next page)
In the beginning, everything was chaos. Nothing touched me. I was different.
I began to look very carefully. I smelled wet pavement...I tasted flour and water...
I heard trains...I felt great pain in my head. I was different.
I was aware of things I did not understand. I was much smaller
than a hummingbird. I began to talk to other beings.
They were companions. I created them.
Flowers complained to me that they were small and flawed
and no one would gather them.
Injured mice told me how they longed to die.
Trees mourned that they must give up their leaves to Winter.
Bulging ripe apples shared the ecstasy of coming of age.
The earth was creating me and I was different.
My home began to reveal itself.
It was full of colour...it was light and made of wind...it moved when I moved ..it added to
itself over time.

~poem and art by Pamela Allen~