

Interview Lucienne Fontannaz

From Bex, in the Vaud Canton to Sydney in Australia, how have you become a Swiss abroad?

Whenever I visit Bex or even think of the small town and its surrounding mountains, I am deeply moved. My parents, siblings and I left our hometown when I was quite young, as my father was offered a teaching position in Lausanne. But Bex never left me. In those days, it still had echoes of the past, of the many travelers from all over the world who visited this little town at the foot of the Alps. Victor Hugo spent time in my great grand-parents' confiserie-salon de thé which had attached a French and English bookshop and reading room. I loved our trips back then, from Lausanne to Bex, to spend time with my grand-parents, in particular my grand-mother who was a trained teacher and was doing replacements in the nearby mountains' village schools.

Perhaps as a consequence, I have always believed that education is vital. After graduating from l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts as an art teacher I taught for two years in Lausanne, and then decided to leave for Montreal, and the 'new world', where, in the bilingual Town of Mount Royal suburb, I became the first specialist primary and secondary school art teacher. Soon after, I opened a small private art school which was quite successful. While studying for a Master degree in Art Education at Concordia University, I met my husband, an Australian. We had two children soon after establishing ourselves in Sydney. Here, I continued teaching art at school and university levels and undertook a Masters in Art Administration to become a curator of art exhibitions. More recently I have been focusing on my own artwork, completing a Masters by Research in Fine Arts. Significantly, the residence in Brunnen will correspond exactly with the time I arrived in Australia 40 years ago!

What is nowadays your link with Switzerland?

I usually return to Switzerland each year as I still have family in and near Lausanne—my mother, siblings, cousins- as well as friends and colleagues. In Sydney, I have given talks about my work and exhibited paintings on Swiss subjects within the context of the Swiss Australian Cultural Association. In 2015, I curated the Swiss Artists Exhibition in the pavilion located on the famous Bondi Beach. Earlier, I co-curated and brought to Sydney a major exhibition of works from the Lausanne Collection de l'Art Brut. Opened by the Swiss Ambassador to Australia, this was a major cultural exchange.

Do you feel the influence of this 'double belonging' in your work as an artist?

I do indeed. In the early 1990s, I initiated and curated national exhibitions of Australian Aboriginal art from the Western and Central Deserts. An aspect of this work was investigating and making video archives of Aboriginal women telling their traditional stories while drawing in the sand. It was clear that for them, their place of birth, the landscape in which they lived and their stories had a life affirming inter-relationship. This revelation had a strong impact on me. Thereafter I determined that I would dedicate my time and energies to my own artwork. This coincided with a period for me of particular longing for the landscapes of the Swiss Alps. From my Sydney studio with bay windows

overlooking the wide horizon of the Pacific Ocean, I decided to explore through painting my own sense of place, conjuring up the essence of the Swiss mountains and lakes that I remembered well and was missing so much. The many works I created on this subject were accompanied by citations from famous early travelers in the Alps, scientists and writers. These paintings and texts were exhibited in several galleries and museums in Switzerland, firstly at the Musée du Chablais in my hometown, Bex. While in Switzerland I began researching the legends of the Gruyère Prealps, subsequently exhibiting my new series of paintings inspired by these stories at the Gruyères Castle. My further research into the Vaud Alps legends inspired yet another series of paintings, published in book form in Bex, with texts in 4 languages.

Why did you wish to participate in the program 'Artist in Residence?'

I applied for the residency in Brunnen because I thought it would be a wonderful opportunity to explore the many enticing aspects of the town and region, past and present: its landscapes, geography, history and legends. Brunnen and its surroundings is less known to me, but by all accounts is very beautiful with its green hills reaching down all the way to its winding lake, and its majestic nearby mountains. In addition to such visual inspiration, the region is rich in powerful historical and legendary narratives that are central to the ethos of the Swiss people and nation. I am intrigued by the influence this legacy has on present day life in Brunnen and how such a history might be re-presented through the artistic imagination.

What do you miss most of Switzerland in Australia?

I definitely miss the sublime vistas of the Alps, the mountain lakes, walking in these grand landscapes at different seasons, their closeness and relationship to towns. I know best that I miss the Alps when the cloud formations along the Pacific Ocean's horizon turn into a distant mountain range, clearly present but unreachable, or when I swim in the warm waters and see high waves rising to peaks with surf board riders sliding down like skiers in powdered snow. The landscape of one's childhood will reassert itself, anywhere!

What will you miss most of Australia during your residence in Brunnen?

I am quite sure that the intense and exciting experience of the residency in Brunnen will be (almost) all consuming and therefore I will not have a lot of time to think about Australia!

However, it will likely feel different to be painting without a 180 degree view of the great southern ocean. And I will have to get used to not hearing those thunderous waves hitting the sandstone cliffs at night. Instead, I expect I will notice the more gentle light of the Swiss summer and the softer sounds of the local birds, the wind in the trees.