

The death of the author and the birth of a new tragedy

In the summer of 1992, a fictitious New Brunswick artist by the name of Philip Rodriguez died. His virtual loss was mourned by three family members, an artist named Duncan MacDonald and myself. The village of Juniper, like the rest of New Brunswick, didn't notice his death – nor his existence for that matter. Philip's non-existence, however, was highly influential in the art of both Duncan and I. It is on this final point I wish to write.

On a muggy summer day in 1974, much like today, I went trout-fishing by the train tracks of the Juniper summit. A young introverted lady with a sketchbook and tacklebox sure that fishing and drawing were not just for men. A few hours into sketching the fish I wasn't catching, I noticed an entity moving in the distance – far down the tracks. The haze above the bed of rock and steel obscured this distant image – not to mention the infinite number of flies buzzing within eyeshot. I packed my gear and walked towards the figure. I found myself greeting an older farmer, moving his cows across the tracks from one pasture to another for grazing. Noticing my sketchbook under one arm, Philip invited me to his little log cabin to meet his wife and have some hot tea. Hot tea on a hot day. I never would have conceived of it myself.

Mrs. Rodriguez, not interested in divulging her real name, greeted me and hastily swept the kitchen floor – a dirt floor at that – into what she considered decent to present to a “lovely” guest. We sat and chatted about their lives in the woods, of non-fish, the Dunganven Hooper and tales of other mythical entities. The topic soon turned to my sketchbook. I became nervous at the thought of showing my drawings to someone, but conceded to show them to these backwood folks. Philip looked at the drawings of the non-fish and laughed. He called them perfect. He said they were exactly what Juniper needed. He flipped through the pages and gave phenomenal incites into what I was doing. He said: “you are drawing things as an excuse to escape the real. There are no fish here, but you have imagined them into the little streams beside the tracks.” Philip proceeded to talk about all the things that Juniper needed (for what seemed like an eternity): art, fish and people. In that order. At this point, Mrs. Rodriguez piped up to say that that her husband was an artist. He proceeded to guide me to his shack, pulled a cord attached to a pulley, lifting a piece of plywood revealing a kind of skylight with mosquito mesh and more importantly, hundreds of stacked paintings with plastic covering them.

Philip's works were and still are colour studies. Despite his colourblindness – discovered upon enrolling in the military during WWII - he maintained that not “seeing” colours properly was a kind of abstraction for him. “Colourblindness as abstraction” he used to say. I began visiting the Rodriguez cabin frequently, sketching, writing down thoughts, chatting with the reclusive couple and looking for any excuse to escape the stresses of socializing with schoolmates. The Rodriguez's became my surrogate parents.

Not being able to afford art supplies became a problem quickly. Luckily, the MacDonalds moved to Hartland, New Brunswick in 1976, with a load of kids, a grandfather, and in search of babysitting. I approached Rachel, the mother, and offered my (non)expertise in watching the children whenever she needed. A gig was born. More art born. Colourful things. Paintings. Sculptural objects. Books about art. Art about books. A budget. Life was good. This went on for several years. The kids ranged in ages from 1 – 11 – grumpy – seventy-something. Do the math. I was set. After most of them were asleep, one would watch me draw, write and read. He was cheeky enough to copy me. Grabbing paper and a crayon, holding his chin, and squinting with an awkward stare, Duncan drew me incessantly. He drew me as a chicken every time - in one line. I mentioned his drawings to Philip who was immediately interested. Philip said I was Duncan's non-chicken, citing similarities to this line of irrationale with my own non-fish.

Philip and Duncan MacDonald didn't meet until Duncan was almost 14. I told Philip about a drawing that Duncan did of Passiphae – copying Picasso onto the wallpaper of his room. Upon seeing the work, Philip realized he wanted to teach MacDonald how to use colour. Philip, Duncan and I worked together frequently for several years – even joking about writing a manifesto of our imaginary collective. I can't remember what we were going to call it. I moved to Montreal. Duncan moved to Toronto to study art, Philip and his wife stayed in Juniper.

Then something sad happened. On an extremely hot day in the summer of 1992, much like today, Philip's heart failed. Mrs. Rodriguez's heart was broken. Hours after he died, I received the news from Duncan. His father had pronounced him dead. Duncan's father. We were devastated: Duncan, Mrs. Rodriguez, myself and several anonymous farmers from Juniper. The trauma manifested in strange ways. Duncan thought he was me. I thought I was Duncan. And we both thought Philip was us.

Duncan had a "group show" at York University (1993) dedicated to Philip. He showed drawings, sculpture and textworks. The drawings were supposed to be by Philip, the textworks by me, and the sculpture apparently "his". In "reality", the works were all by MacDonald. To mask things further, the show was called "Trieste" - a town in Italy - a mis-spelled triste and a dissociative threesome. The show confused me. Not only me but others - the people who saw it. Some thought Duncan was schizo; others felt sad that Philip had died; his friends (who knew that Duncan had created all the artworks in the show) thought the show was funny.

My own practice suffered. I began creating works in Braille, investigating the invisible in an attempt to bring Philip back to life. My textworks became illegible. My writings - once poetic - became invisible, or non-writings. I began to wonder if Philip would approve of this work, comparing it to my earlier non-fish - or was it all nonsense? At this point, I am in the process of erasing my existence. Showing intermittently in galleries, sometimes under Duncan's name - sometimes swapping work with him - sometimes confused as to whose work is whose. I understand that Philip is dead. I just wish his non-existence wasn't.

Josyane Massa (on behalf of Duncan MacDonald)