

An Invitation into Painting: Sara Robichaud's Unapologetic Affair

by Marie Leduc, Ph.D.

Entering Sara Robichaud's home in Nanaimo is an invitation into painting. From the outside, the 100-year-old wood frame house is disorderly and unresolved. Construction materials are stacked near the base of the two-storey structure and the aged stucco siding and wood trim are in sore need of attention. A firmly packed dirt path lined by unkempt grass leads to the back door where Robichaud greets her visitors and leads us into the kitchen.

We (myself and few other members of the artistic community) are visiting Robichaud's home to participate in an exhibit/performance she calls "An Unapologetic Affair." In staging this event, Robichaud has taken a bold leap in her 20-year painting career; she is inviting friends and strangers into her home for an on-going artistic project – or unapologetic affair – that merges her domestic and artistic lives. As a mother and spouse, Robichaud, like so many female artists, has had to shape her career in and around her home life. Her studio is, in fact, located in a converted garage just a few paces from her backdoor. For the past seven years, she has juggled her painting time around caring for a young child, her husband's unpredictable work schedule, teaching, and the on-going restoration of her house. Out of necessity, her home has become the locus of her practice and the muse for her abstract imagery and approach.

Initially, Robichaud's creative source was her own body as she went through pregnancy, childbirth, and caring for a baby with health issues. Life as a mother and wife was a major shift from her itinerant days as a student, tree planter, and wanderer. "Becoming a mother," Robichaud explains, "forced me to slow down, so I had to just look. I think that is when my work became more precise and thoughtful." As she settled into her new role, she began to incorporate the outlines and shadows of objects she found around her – an ornate sofa, claw-foot bathtub, kitchen utensils, the stethoscope used to listen to her daughter's heart, her bra, and various lace fabrics. These objects, or at least their outlines and shadows, began to populate her canvases. Rendered in acrylic with definite hard edge lines, her paintings have a deliberate femininity, if one can still use that term: curving shapes that recall the sensual form of the human body, a palette of soft pastel colours, and a distinct decorativeness that erupts in raised lace patterns and the judicious use of gold and opalescent pigments. The result is a gentle interplay between recognized objects that only surface through their outlines and shadows, and the reconfiguration of these same shapes into wholly new and tantalizing forms.

Entering Robichaud's sunny kitchen and home is then an encounter with the origins of her work. A wood table fills the centre of the space while vintage cabinets in Robichaud's favorite pale green cover two walls. Small kitchen appliances and vessels are carefully spaced like sculptures across the top of the cabinets. The wooden chairs, painted in a soft grey, are well-worn and inviting. A faded sofa draped with fabric is set in front of a patio door and a stack of brightly coloured toys fill one corner. After taking in this scene I notice a pattern drawn in pencil on one of the kitchen walls. This is not a child's scribble but a careful tracing of many small diamonds that together form the shape of a mini-ironing board. Around a corner, the actual ironing board, with its open grill, is

fastened to the wall by short extended legs. Pointing up like a rocket, the board is set six inches away from the wall so that it casts a patterned shadow. "Some of the the best effects," Robichaud offers, "are at night when the light is single sourced. But, in the middle of the day, the light comes from so many different directions. The gradiated shadows can sometimes look just like they are painted on the wall."

Leading her guests into the living room, Robichaud points out another tracing, barely visible. On a wall across the room I see the oblique shadow of a lamp painted in pale mauve, just a simple tone down from the light purple of the wall. "I did this with brushwork," Robichaud smiles, "I haven't done brushwork in like forever. I can't believe how elated I was." Near floor level in the dining room the shadow of a child's high chair is permanently cast onto the deep purple surface. This image, Robichaud notes, is actually not a pigment change, "rather it is an application of gloss medium which you can only see when it catches the light." Still, she explains, there is more to be done; "I want to scrape and apply the painterly techniques of my hard edge painting to the walls. It is like my house has become a painting so if I've made a mistake I have to resolve it *as* a painting."

Robichaud leads her visitors on a tour of rooms and alcoves. Other objects and shadows emerge along with the evidence of a home that carries the history of past and present lives: her child's crayon drawings on the wall from a few years before, her grandmother's china, old portraits, and antique furniture are situated alongside the bared evidence of an aged house that has undergone numerous "scrapings" and "paintings." Robichaud and her husband have gradually modernized some rooms, making them more habitable, but much is still to be done as time and finances allow. For now, the past layers of the home – paint, wallpaper, and aged boards – are left as visible counterpoints to Robichaud's more recent interventions on the walls.

After touring the house, Robichaud guides us back through the kitchen and out the door to the studio. This is the space reserved specifically for artistic production. Here Robichaud transfers her images onto canvases. The rectilinear surfaces are marked by the familiar shadows and outlines found on the interior walls of her home and painted with the same palette of soft colours – pink, mauve, pale green, and soft grey – which are punctuated by lace textures, gloss finishes, and a deep matte black. The ironing board appears again with its multitude of diamonds on one canvas while the shape of a vanity mirror is described on another. The works are all in progress. Tape masks off shapes and bare canvas awaits new layers of colour and gel. Like Robichaud's house, the resolution of these works will only come through a process of painting, scraping, layering and reworking.

By opening her home and studio, Robichaud is sharing a personal intimacy that a gallery exhibition cannot replicate. She wants the visitors to see her work, process, and home as one and the same – as both painting and muse. As she explains, "I understand that the work is beyond my control when it goes into a gallery so this is an opportunity for me to share where it truly comes from." At the same time this venture leaves Robichaud feeling vulnerable. As she tells me later, after the other guests have left, "having people in my home where they can see all of the flaws, and think that they know who I am because of it, makes me uncomfortable but, at the same time, has a charge to it that compels me creatively."

So, how much does the consumer of her work need to know about her life and her sources? Robichaud is testing this question, just as every artist does when she moves a work from its place of origin and creation to the public domain of the gallery. For their part,

the visitors can also feel awkward, especially when entering a home. The gallery, commercial or public, provides an invisible screen between the artist's life and the work. The viewer can take in the work as an object disengaged from the artist's intentions and influences. As Robichaud notes, "a gallerist reminded me, that some people aren't concerned with how or why a work was made. They just like it for their own reasons. They put their own meaning onto it."

The gallery is also an open space where the rules of engagement are very different. One does not ask to step up to a painting or move into another room. Entering a home, on the other hand, one reacts to the unspoken conventions that define personal privacy and space. It is perhaps the awkward reaction to these converging conventions – artistic and domestic – that encourages a nervous conviviality among the visitors to Robichaud's home. Artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija and others have tried to create a similar affect by bringing the home or kitchen into a gallery. Robichaud has reversed this move by bringing the public into her home, and through this gesture, "An Unapologetic Affair" generates a lively discussion about art, creativity, and exhibiting practices around the kitchen table.

A month later, Robichaud hosts a dinner party as a final act before her now-finished paintings move to a gallery for an exhibition. The guests gather in the living room, dining room and kitchen. They are invited to move freely and explore the transformations throughout the house. As dusk descends the shadows cast by the lamp-lit objects merge with the painted shapes on the walls. Candles light a path upstairs past a vanity with its familiar curving frame and its adornment of personal mementos. The bedrooms and study are staged with more objects and interventions: tape on the floor defines a division of space in the master bedroom, a breakfast tray with an ornate cup and saucer awaits on the bed, a tiny dress hangs on a wall, and the shadow of a naked wire lampshade casts an oblique pattern across a room. Finished canvases now hang throughout the house alongside the objects that inspired them. In this milieu, they can only be viewed in relation to these objects, their many reflections on the walls, and to the artist, herself, as she plays host and docent in a living exhibition.

With "An Unapologetic Affair," Robichaud creates a wholly new work that is, at once, performance, installation, and painting. I am reminded here of other "house" projects such as Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* (c. 1923), Louise Nevelson's immersive home with its maze of black boxes, and, more contemporaneously, Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1993) and Andrea Zittel's on-going A-Z projects. By combining multiple disciplines along with an invitation into her home, Robichaud creates a work that takes the viewer "inside" her paintings, introducing them to the objective *and* experiential sources of her work. Eventually, however, Robichaud's individual canvases are released from their "home." In the gallery, they meet the public in a new space where they are recognized for their own merits, independent of the influences and experiences that produced them.