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art of the peace

The Mattsons

THREE VISUAL JOURNEYS—ONE BLOODLINE



TOUR DE FRANCE

BEST OF THREE STUDIOS

EMILY LOZERON

The Mattsons



THREE VISUAL JOURNEYS—ONE BLOODLINE

WRITTEN BY ANDREA JOHANNSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KARL MATTSO

On a stretch of blue highway in the Peace Region, you will discover the hamlet of Rolla, British Columbia. This unassuming collection of houses and historic commercial buildings exudes a magical, mystical presence on the quiet rolling prairie. Many talented artists and musicians call Rolla their hometown, but have since left this farming community for “brighter lights.”

Rolla is also the home of the Mattson family. Mother Emilie and sons Karl and Dean share the land of the working ranch one and a half kilometres from the town. The family homestead has seen generations of Mattsons thrive and create a sustainable lifestyle that demonstrates hard work, dedication, and creative output. An understanding and appreciation of the land is evident in their artistic pursuits and environmental interests.

The Mattsons are three very strong individuals who are connected by blood and artistic vision. They work separately but passionately support each other's endeavours. After participating in several joint ventures, Emilie, Karl, and Dean had the wisdom to realize that their strengths were grounded in working separately. Thus they have developed a respect for each other by working together while working apart. Quoting from the synopsis of their upcoming exhibition at the Art Gallery of Grande Prairie in March 2016, “Although living in the same geographical space, individual response to the physical and spiritual has resulted in unique imagery. Differing styles express a similar feel to the struggles, anxieties and challenges that are inherent in the human condition.”

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To fully understand and appreciate this family dynamic of individual but cohesive artistic beliefs, a visit to the Mattson ranch is necessary. Coming into the Mattson enclave is like entering a monumental work of art in progress. Emilie believes that your life is your art, and that sentiment is evident as we make our way past monumental metal sculptures and modified rustic architecture to Emilie's studio. We sit in front of the woodstove drinking wine and talking about family history and the world of art, while two domestic birds flit about the space and grandchildren enter the studio and sit quietly in the background.

“I always considered myself an artist.” Emilie begins. She was interested in art from a young age and attributes her parents for nurturing this interest, by not discouraging but rather congratulating her on some of her endeavors. By accepting her artistic nature, her parents supported an environment of free and authentic creativity. Consequently to answer the question, “Why do you create art?” Emilie's response is “I was never told not to”.

There is an interesting history of the Mattson family that Emilie likes to tell. Her grandmother came to Prince Rupert from a small town in Norway. She left her husband and travelled to Edmonton, where she was forced by poverty to abandon her two youngest children—Emilie's mom and her younger brother. The two children were adopted by an elderly couple near McBride B.C., where they lived a very secluded life in the bush. Emilie's mother met her future husband when she was sixteen. They were married after the war. Emilie described her mother as “rock solid”, very reclusive, and a profound influence on her

(Left to Right) Dean, Emilie, and Karl Mattson



Placenta 3, Emilie Mattson

life. Though their house was a quiet one, Emilie remembers receiving paint-by-number kits for Christmas and an easel from the Sears catalogue. Emilie's mother never found out what happened to her birth mother but was visited by her sister from Norway when she was sixty-seven.

Emilie received no formal art training; She took only two art courses in high school by correspondence. But she feels that the motivation for her art is instinctive. She says that she creates "to please myself. I never feel compelled to measure up."

Of vital importance to Emilie is having her own space "away from the kitchen table." She and Dean built her studio twenty-seven years ago and she says it has been her salvation. "Every girl needs a space of her own, for the good of her soul, and as a place to store all her stuff. I spend a lot of time here whether I get a lot done or a little. I can just come out here and start messing around. There's always something to do." Having her studio thirty feet from her house makes it convenient for Emilie to access her warm and light-filled area at any time.

Emilie's studio is full of her amazing creations, some complete, others ready to be repurposed or reimagined. One of her most powerful pieces is a tribute to her mother. A metal skeletal form with bone china fingers is enthroned on a wheelchair—a single large crystal hanging in the skull cavity, capturing the light that represents the "spark within." Emilie has displayed this piece outside on a mirror and says that when the sunlight catches it "it just shines."



Runaway 1, Emilie Mattson

Emilie draws, paints, and works in clay, epoxy, and metal. Perhaps the most intriguing medium she uses is cow placenta. Since the Mattson homestead is a working ranch, Emilie's use of this material seems both natural and practical. During a late-night calving episode where the cow placenta was tossed aside, Emilie noticed that the light in the calving barn was shining through this discarded material and the effect so intrigued her that she decided to incorporate it into her art. Examples of her use of cow placenta can be seen in many of her sculptures. It is reminiscent of stained glass, giving an ethereal, translucent quality to her sculptures and assemblages. Emilie will either place the membrane between sheets of glass, attempting to preserve the original colour or dry the placenta, cure and shape it like leather to form specific objects (as in her sculptures *Hangin' Out the Wash* and *Hangin' In*, where a free-flying kite is rendered in placenta). The preservation of the original colour and posterity of the material still challenges Emilie, but appeals to her desire to always be tested.

Even though Emilie humbly professes that she doesn't weld as well as her sons, she has managed to produce some stellar sculptures. Her welding skills grew out of her need for ceramic sculpture bases. From found metal farm objects, Emilie's welded metal sculptures evolved. These sculptures are a hybrid of the real and the fantastic. Representational cows or horses or people are sheltered in other-worldly forests (as in *Under the Tree*). As we look at her works-in-progress, Emilie states that if a piece takes a tragic turn, she will just reinvent the piece until she achieves the result she wants. She's definitely not worried about mistakes being made and, in fact, embraces the challenge.

Not only does Emilie excel at mixed media constructions, but she is adept at drawing and painting. Her two dimensional



The Red Canoe, Dean Mattson

work is loose and moody, colours dark and intense, the line sinuous. The style is reminiscent of the sixteenth century painter El Greco. Her spirit of freedom translates into the way Emilie encouraged her sons Karl and Dean to be involved with art. They were prompted to draw at a very young age and to develop their own individual styles.

Dean Mattson is a poet, musician, songwriter, carpenter, and artist. Even though his work readily sells—Dean has sold more than 150 paintings throughout North America—he never thinks of his paintings as a source of income. Dean reveals that he was very interested in cartooning when he was a young boy. He went to Emily Carr College of Art and Design, where he was intrigued by colour theory. This appealed to the mathematical side of his psyche. He says, “Colour is a science to me.”

Dean’s paintings are full of symbols outlined by bold, dark outlines harkening back to his cartooning days. They are full of intense areas of colour—reminiscent perhaps of aboriginal artist, Norval Morrisseau. Symbols weave their way throughout



Sweetwater 905 Logo, Dean Mattson

all of Dean’s paintings. We are presented with fish, mountains, rivers, boats, trestles, and mysterious groups of figures called ‘watchers.’ Trains gleaned from old books about British Columbia railways show movement, indicate a journey and “are always headed in some direction.” The symbols form a rich, decorative pattern across the picture plane, all held together by colour. Dean says he has a “style within a style.” He describes some symbols as more “cartoony” than others. Yet Dean’s paintings are full of mystery and joy. The symbolism expresses an active narrative; his vernacular bright and magical.

As Emilie Mattson says, “People do art in a lot of different ways.” Approaching Dean’s property, we keep this epithet in mind, for rising out of the land, we see an assortment of old buildings that Dean has collected over the years. Standing as they are, these structures seem like monolithic sculptures growing from out of the ground. These dwellings are often gifted to Dean. They are the source and inspiration for the repurposing of architectural details; or they may be salvaged for future projects. His own studio has benefitted from his homely collection; the two storey space has morphed into a cozy single level dwelling. In fact, the entire area is “reclaimed everything” from the windows to the decorative metal grates. Dean knows the origin of every board in the house, and proudly points out his grandfather’s tools displayed on the wall. Explaining that the building is in its “tenth incarnation” he adds that, “it’s not the way most people’s places look.”

Dean displays his fine woodworking skills on smaller projects. He is presently working on wooden trunks for his daughters. Revealed in this work is the attention to detail and exceptional craftsmanship. When finished, they will display decorative metal features and leatherwork, the mark of a true artisan.

Walking into Karl Mattson’s space, Scavenger Studio, is like walking into a world that is part futuristic model shop, part

salvage yard. The colossal *Lost* sculpture dominates the space, and we are all drawn to her majesty and intrigue. *Lost* is a monumental work that has participated in many exhibitions. She conveys the overriding message of environmental sensitivity that inspires Karl to create. A fabrication of welded metal parts and found objects, *Lost* is used by Karl to deliver a similar message in different ways. Whether her head is set on fire, or images are being projected from her cranium, she is delivering the same message of awareness of how one treats the land. Presenting this concept is such an important driving force for Karl that he has included a tangible “communication device” in the form of a metal box on *Lost*.

Karl is also the mastermind of a series of *Life Pods*—metal sculptures that are actual working emergency devices he has created to house his family in time of crisis. Several breathing tanks are attached to each pod, with the ability to sustain life for several hours. The ability to breathe in a possibly toxic environment is an underlying theme in many of Karl’s pieces (*Lost* is equipped with breathing tanks as well).

Karl has also enjoyed success as a documentary film maker. *Sisters of Karnataka*, *Industrial Evolution*, and *Keeping the Peace* are some of his better known productions. Karl considers his immersion in documentary film making as a great learning experience and plans to become involved with challenging and abstract art film projects, with powerful environmental messages. The environment is always at the background of Karl’s work, no matter what media he chooses. “This country has already become different because of the slow, steady march of the gas situation. I’ll make statements about it. Somebody has to.”

Karl’s paintings are soft in rendering and dark in atmosphere. Several of his paintings are self-portraits and deal with the

duality of the mind: representing two alternate realities, the canvas is often visually divided in two. One side represents an existence more dangerous and foreboding than the other. Karl is interested in both these domains, but chooses to embrace the one that incorporates the light, in a world that chases away the dark shadows.

From March through May 2016, Emilie, Karl and Dean Mattson will be exhibiting at the Art Gallery of Grande Prairie. The show is called *Expedition* and deals with “three visual journeys—one bloodline.” You can see that these three artists have very different ways of expressing themselves, yet there is an underlying connection in their work. *Expedition* reveals how different yet how connected this talented family is as they make their way through life. Dean emphasizes that since “we [each] have our own ideas” working collaboratively can result in some conflict they would rather avoid. Yet they all seem to be inspired by the power of the land, the importance of being environmentally aware and the ability to demonstrate their resilient family ties.

The Mattson family embodies the definition of individualism; yet at the same time they are “family strong.” They each live their art every day in the most authentic manner, as they ride through life with conviction, moving forward while looking back.



Vessel in Snow, Karl Mattson



Lost, Karl Mattson

Sweetwater905 Arts & Music Festival

CELEBRATION OF MUSIC, LITERARY,
VISUAL AND PERFORMANCE ART

WRITTEN BY ANDREA JOHANNSON

It's that burgeoning time of summer when the wind blows sweet over the prairies and the long awaited festival season begins. The gentle, quiet country landscape is patiently waiting for the kick-off to the wild and raucous Sweetwater905 Arts and Music Festival—an eclectic gathering of maddeningly talented artists, musicians, writers, farm folk, circus entertainers—converging on the Mattson family ranch outside of Rolla June 13th—15th, 2015, 16km north of Dawson Creek, 1.5km west of Rolla.

If you are fortunate enough to have met the Mattsons (Emilie, Karl, Dean, and beyond), you will understand how this uncommon assembly came into existence, and why it's been such a huge success since its inception.

For some cosmic reason, Rolla is a hotbed of artistic talent. Combine this with the fearless entrepreneurial spirit of Emilie Mattson, and you have the makings of a dynamic collection of vibrant souls. In 1997, Emilie Mattson and Donna Kane took on the responsibility of putting together a festival to represent the artists in northeastern British Columbia. Thus Sweetwater Moon Festival was born. Musicians and artists used the Rolla Community Hall (exterior beautifully painted by Emilie) as their showcase, where a small but appreciative audience was entertained by local talent. The festival eventually moved to the Mattson farm on September 9th, 2005 and was appropriately called Sweetwater905. Now the festival could kick up its heels; entertainment would be

presented in a less structured fashion. Through hard work, great organizational skills, and lots of willing volunteers, Sweetwater905 has grown every year yet still retains its homey, intimate atmosphere.

Dean Mattson explains that the original intention was to attract music and art to the community. Artists could come to Rolla instead of area residents having to seek entertainment in larger urban centres. Also, the Mattsons and other local talent could be celebrated.

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Karl adds that they like to keep the combination of talent “fairly diverse.” Diverse is an understatement. Eclectic performers Severn Suzuki, Nora Curiston, and Roy Forbes are among festival alumni performers.

This year will feature a cool mix of bluegrass, country, folk, and just plain wild music performed by King Crow and the Ladies from Hell, Noosa, and Folyk Strum Strum (to name a few). Check the website at Sweetwater905.com for a complete list of entertainers and ticket prices.

Writer Ian Coyote is back by popular demand and poet Lorna Crozier will be performing on stage. And of course the agricultural arts are represented. As they say, “Bring your tractor, bring your milk cow!” Last year butter churning and horse packing were demonstrated. Be prepared to see a circus act or two cavorting across the grounds.

Visit Albert's Loft, the big red barn that morphs into a gallery/writers' platform. While the barn is used all year round for special events like concerts and movies, it is the showcase for visual artists from the Peace Region and other areas throughout the western provinces.

Kit Fast, curator of the Dawson Creek Art Gallery, is organizing the visual arts segment this year, as he has done for the past four years. He works closely with the participants and encourages newer and emerging artists who might not show in a mainstream gallery to exhibit their work at this distinctive and vibrant event. As well as being able to view the Mattson's art on the festival site, there will be at least four artists set up in the barn. Peace Region artists Tabitha Logan, Stephen Ferris, Amy Gothard, and Caily Oldershaw, will all be in attendance.

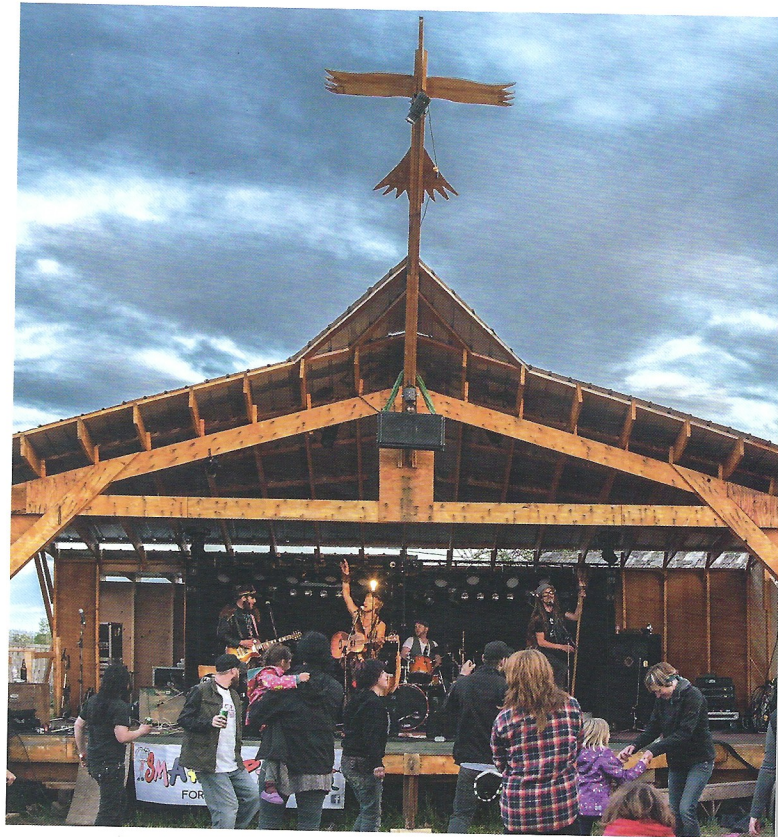
Kit is also co-ordinating a special guest event in the loft. Last year, local artist Peter von Tiesenhausen showed one of his video installations in the upper level. In past years this area has hosted mini film festivals. There will also be a plein air demonstration on Saturday afternoon in front of Emilie's studio. Artists will set-up around the grounds, displaying, selling and demonstrating their work. Painter and printmaker Mary Mottishaw and photographer/mixed media artist Kit Fast, who have had several shows together, will also be exhibiting in the Red Barn. Kit welcomes any artists for the Saturday open air event and any questions can be sent to him at curator@dcartgallery.ca.

Emilie Mattson's studio will be open to the public, where she will show works in progress and finished pieces as well. Don't miss the glass and cow placenta coffin that she is working on for a Mattson family group show at the Art Gallery of Grande Prairie in March 2016.

Karl and Dean will take time from their hectic festival duties to talk to attendees during the weekend about their own work, and, with some advance notice, would be pleased to show people their studio spaces.

Keeping with the Sweetwater 905 theme, children will have the opportunity to participate in various arts and crafts projects; that is, when they aren't being engaged by the children's entertainers. This atmosphere makes for a family-friendly weekend. It is on Father's Day after all!

"The Sweetwater festival is a truly unique event," says Kit Fast. "It is drawing an ever increasing audience over the years. It is different and special because it brings art, history, family, and farming together; and holding it all together is the music."



Sweetwater905 Festival. Photo by Karl Mattson



Sweetwater905, Dean Mattson. Photo by Karl Mattson