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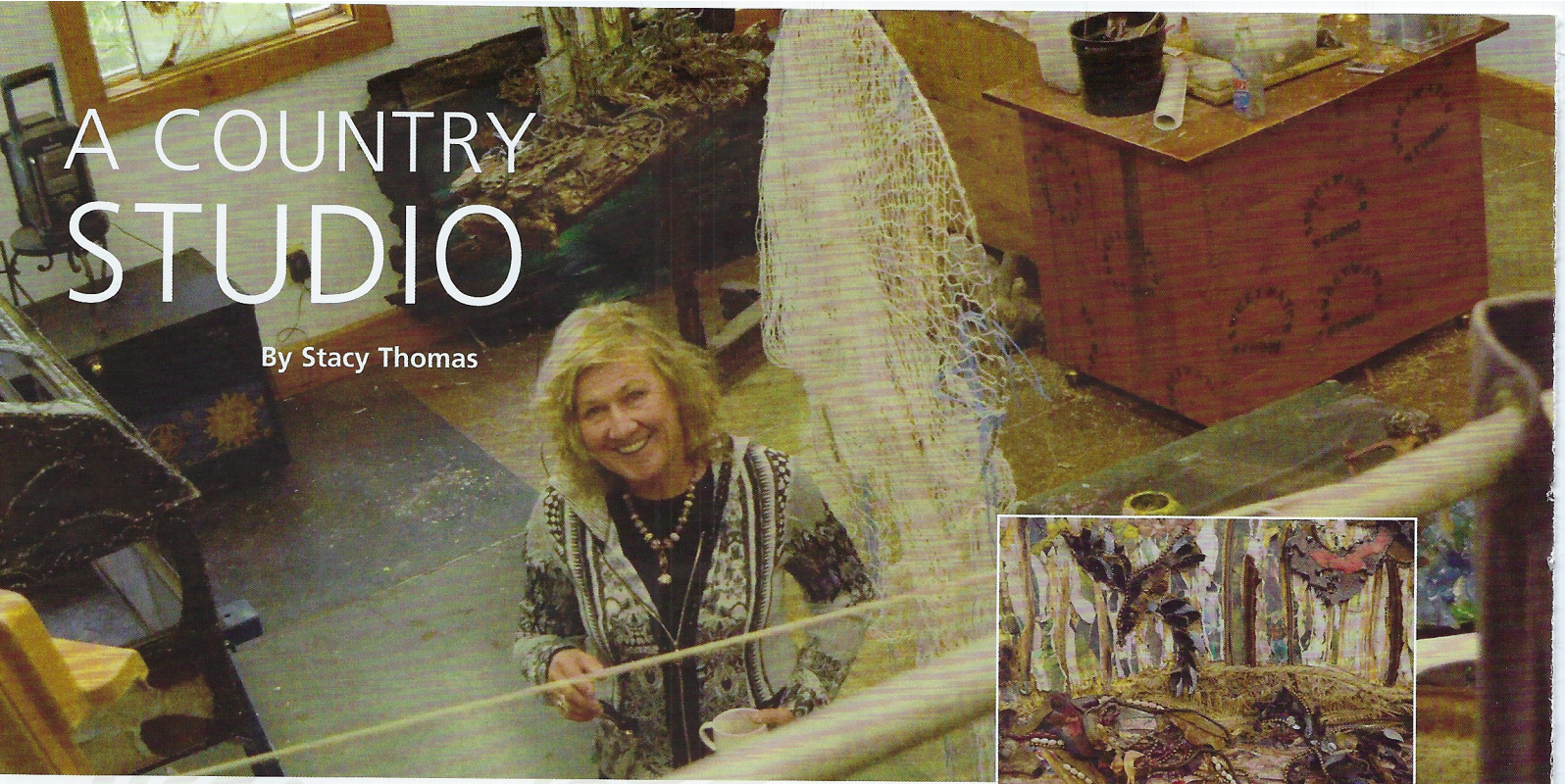
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FALL/WINTER 2015

# A COUNTRY STUDIO

By Stacy Thomas



“ She always had an artistic bent, she says, an urge to express something that was often hard to realize being so far isolated from any kind of recognizable art scene or influences. But she made her own way; 22 years ago, after making art in the house and in a small cabin on the property, she decided it was time for her own space, a place to honour her artistic side.”

**Above Main & Inset:** Emilie Mattson in her Rolla, B.C. studio; earlier work by Mattson, made from found articles and collage.

The first thing you hear when you enter Emilie Mattson's studio is the birds. The sprawling, sun-filled structure, nestled into the Mattson ranch in the rolling hills surrounding Rolla, B.C., is home to two bright-yellow budgies; they flit and fly noisily about the open room, perching on the branches of a tree which grows to the ceiling, or balancing on a line where—rather than rags or some scraps of a paint-spattered shirt—strips of cow's placenta hang drying. The birds, like everything else in the studio, have a story, and are directly related to Emilie's own life in some way. “It's been going on for six years...I've got birds in my studio,” she says, looking up at the little yellow pair fluttering about above where she sits, the matron of her domain. The birds were her mother's; when she died, Emilie took them into her studio, and so birds have been part of the backdrop ever since. “It's just a feeling of continuity. I don't need birds. If they both dropped dead at the

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**Above:** At 68, Mattson still takes inspiration from her immediate surroundings and strives to improve her art.

same time I wouldn't have them. But that doesn't happen. It's part of my mother's story. So everything is significant." Everything is significant. A theme which manifests in the materials Mattson chooses for her work, which is eclectic and challenging for some. She came to Rolla 47 years ago, when she was 20—a brand new bride, come to help her husband's father with the family ranch, and they never left.

"I didn't know I was coming here, I just ended up here. I didn't know I was going to be on a farm," says Emilie. "Here I am, and I made it my own. That's how I see things; whatever imperfections they are, it is part of what we are."

She always had an artistic bent, she says, an urge to express something that was often hard to realize being so far isolated from any kind of recognizable art scene or influences. But she made her own way; 22 years ago, after making art in the house and in a small cabin on the property, she decided it was time for her own space, a place to honour her artistic side.

"I always had it in me, and I was being gobbled up by the farm, and our ambitions. I followed my husband, and we've made a life out of that. I don't have any resentment about that, but I felt different because I felt like I was in a different kettle of fish, I just didn't fit into the pond, necessarily," Mattson says. The family's sprawling cattle ranch, where Emilie divides her time between cattle-and horse-raising and her creative endeavours, is also home to the ever-growing annual Sweetwater905 cultural festival which she organizes along with her two sons. It is where Emilie has found her inspiration over the years, realizing that without an artistic community necessarily to feed off of for creative motivation and validation, she would have to look within, and at her immediate surroundings, and at the connection between them. She was already doing work with found articles which she gathered from the land surrounding the farm, when an interaction at a regional art show in Fort St. John with photographer Sandra Semchuk, a teacher at Emily Carr University, convinced her that she was on the right track. "She pumped my ego to say, you're doing

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okay, and I was using material that was in front of my face," Emilie said. "It was a spark. I thought: my art is my life, it's got nothing to do with all the influences from outside, necessarily. . . I decided then that I'll just do my life, and whatever's in front of me, and whatever material I can find, and whatever I bump into, and locally I think it's done me good stead." Mattson's art has not been confined to the Peace; she has exhibited her work in various shows around Western Canada including Artropolis twice in Vancouver and at the Royal Museum in Victoria, B.C. When she built the studio, giving her art the space she had always felt it deserved, it was the beginning of a new phase of confidence and self-realization. "I had a hard time when I was about 40, because I thought, I can't do art unless I leave here, because I had opportunity to step out the door, go somewhere else," she says. "But I decided—it was very difficult, but I decided this is my place, and I'll do it anyway, I don't need to have international recognition or do something

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**Above:** A recent piece made from stretched and dried cow's placenta.

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huge or big. Another thing that validated me was building the studio. It was a big move, it was almost divorce material with my world, because I demanded it." Mattson's work with cow placenta, which came to her when she noticed how similar to stained glass the material looks when stretched, has raised some eyebrows locally and afar, but she continues to work with it and try to improve it as a legitimate medium. "I was in a barn, looking at the stuff, and I realized that it was transparent, like stained glass, and then I started to think about it, the connotations about placenta in general, and all of life. I thought how beautiful it really is, and how you can manipulate it into making a statement about something. I thought that it's a material that is very feminine, and I keep using it because I think it has significance, and I also find it beautiful. I'm just having a hard time maintaining the colour." Emilie has learned how to manipulate the placenta from taxidermists, and otherwise is mostly self-taught. She once had an opportunity to go to art school in New York, before she was married, and while she has pondered how her life may be different now if she had chosen that path, she knows that she is in the right place now, and her art has developed uniquely because of her rural surroundings. "I have had many interesting people go through my door, that are talented, and it's invigorating, and I think, I don't need to go to New York to be fulfilled to do what I do. All I have to do is what I do. I think I have a very comfortable place, and I'll be 68 this year, and I think if maybe I keep doing this for another ten years, maybe I'll do something okay, you know? I'll just do something, and see what happens."



Above: A detail of more of Mattson's mixed media work, constructed from found articles and her own sculpture.

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