

Prairie painter Dorothy Knowles captured ‘memory and time’ in her landscapes

RUTH JONES

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED JUNE 4, 2023

UPDATED JUNE 5, 2023



Dorothy Knowles with her painting *Tangled Weeds* in May 2015. Over her seven-decade career, Ms. Knowles made the prairies, with its flowers and grasses and sweeping skies, a focus of her work.

IMAGE COURTESY THE GALLERY/ART PLACEMENT INC. ARTWORK COPYRIGHT ESTATE OF DOROTHY KNOWLES PEREHUDOFF.

She painted the Prairie. It was not the only subject the Saskatchewan artist Dorothy Knowles chose in her seven-decades-long career. But it was the one she returned to,

its flowers and grasses and sweeping skies. “She could find endless new ways to see it,” her daughter Catherine Perehudoff Fowler says.

A farm girl who started painting at 21 after following a friend to a summer art program, Ms. Knowles became one of the most prominent artists of her generation.

“She would pick a spot that looked good typically, and set up her easel [to] paint there,” says Robert Christie, a long-time friend and former owner of Art Placement, Ms. Knowles’s Saskatoon gallery. “And then halfway through the day would just turn around and paint what was whatever was behind her.”

According to Ms. Perehudoff Fowler, she never tired of the challenge of making a painting work, finding new possibilities in even the most familiar landscape. “She would set herself challenges that nobody would ever know about. She can only use three colours, or she’s doing a landscape, she’s not allowed to use green.”

Prolific until her final days, Dorothy Elsie Knowles Perehudoff died in hospice in Saskatoon on May 16, following several months of declining health. She was 96.

Born in the small town of Unity, Sask., April 7, 1927, Ms. Knowles grew up immersed in the natural world. Her parents, Elsie and Robert Knowles, had been born in Ontario but met out west. Elsie had taken a teaching position and Robert had a homestead. They lived the first years of their marriage in a sod house on the farm where Dorothy would spend her childhood.

The youngest of four – the last of her three brothers, Robert, was born in 1919 – she was often left to her own devices. “A lot of her time was spent alone,” her daughter Carol Perehudoff says. “I think that made her very thoughtful, which is good if you’re an artist.”

When her brothers started high school, the family moved to Saskatoon. But she still relished her time back on the farm, pulling vegetables from the garden or wandering over the Prairie.

She had not intended to become an artist. The courses she took for her University of Saskatchewan Arts degree were mostly in health sciences. But out at Emma Lake in the summer of 1948, under the tutelage of the watercolourist Reta Cowley, she discovered she could paint.

Returning to Saskatoon, Ms. Knowles threw herself into developing her new skills. She took classes from Ms. Cowley and, later, the American-Canadian artist Eli Borenstein. At a party, she met William (Bill) Perehudoff. Like her, he was an artist from a farming family. He left to study in New York the next day, but letters were soon flying back and forth between them. When she took off for a course at Goldsmiths in London, England, he followed her.



Ms. Knowles started painting at 21 after following a friend to a summer art program, and went on to become one of the most prominent artists of her generation.

JACK DOBSON/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

While the course was less than she had hoped for, Mr. Perehudoff was not; they married in Paris in 1952. After a honeymoon packed with all the French and Italian sights their limited budget would allow, they were ready for home.

Saskatoon artists in the 1950s were a scrappy, ambitious bunch. Ms. Knowles had a day job as a lab technician, her husband as a commercial artist and illustrator. She painted in the basement and the kitchen, he in a studio he eventually built in the backyard. When they could, they'd cram art supplies into the back of the station wagon with their three young daughters and head out on the Prairie.

Summers were spent at Emma Lake. Beginning in 1955, the university program where Ms. Knowles took her first art classes began hosting workshops that brought connections to New York artists, critics and galleries.

American colourfield painters Barnett Newman and Kenneth Noland led sessions in the 1960s. So did minimalist artists Frank Stella and Donald Judd. Clement Greenberg, the American art critic and early champion of Abstract Expressionism, led the workshop in 1962. He became a close friend and frequent visitor of both Ms. Knowles and Mr. Perehudoff.

Surrounded by abstractionists, Ms. Knowles was an outlier who continued painting landscapes. Her subject suited her sensibility. It had all the formal challenges of colour, technique and composition that she and Mr. Perehudoff dissected with relish as they critiqued each other's work. And it focused a love of the land that never left her. "She was also able to be very quiet and to really feel," her daughter Rebecca Perehudoff says, "to get very still as she absorbed her setting, to really feel nature."

Her attentiveness was rewarded with attention. By the 1970s, her career was thriving, and she and her husband were often travelling for exhibitions or to visit galleries and friends in Boston and New York. Dealers and curators flocked to Saskatoon.

"We kind of joked about it back then," Mr. Christie says. "It was hard to get work done because there [were] so many people coming through town." Most were coming to see Ms. Knowles, Mr. Perehudoff, or both, but they shared their

connections around, more interested in promoting the work of others than their own.

Ms. Knowles's renown peaked in the early 1980s, with a major solo exhibition touring out of the Edmonton Art Gallery in 1982. By then, instead of rolling around in the back of a station wagon, her daughters were driving her Volkswagen van into the mountains or painting beside her in the back.

Things cooled in the 1990s. Her exhibitions, though still successful, didn't draw the same crowds. Still, she kept painting, kept working. Kept going to openings. "She was a major person, but she was also a regular person," says Levi Nicholat who, with his partner Donald Roach took over Art Placement in 2013. "It meant so much to artists to see her touching base, asking people how it was going in the studio for them, having a 30 minute-conversation about green."



Ms. Knowles in her studio in 2012. Her achievements were recognized with the Saskatchewan Order of Merit in 1987 and the Order of Canada in 2004.

Her achievements were recognized with the Saskatchewan Order of Merit in 1987 and the Order of Canada in 2004, but she remained an artist among artists. When she went out, Mr. Nicholat says, “She wasn’t untouchable, she was never out of reach.”

A 2018 exhibition at the Remai Modern in Saskatoon showed her work alongside pieces by Faye HeavyShield and Elaine Cameron-Weir. For the exhibition’s curator, Rose Bouthillier, it was the relationship between time and landscape that brought together these three Prairie artists from different generations. “It’s not just a moment that she’s capturing. It’s a space in movement.” Describing an early piece by Ms. Knowles included in the show, an almost abstract diffusion of colours, Ms. Bouthillier remarked, “It just encapsulated something so reasoned about her work, which is kind of like the mind’s eye. And the sense of, you know, always kind of seeing memory and time in the landscape.”

COVID-19 curtailed Ms. Knowles’s exhibition-going but not her art-making. She emerged from the pandemic with a new Toronto gallery and an exhibition in September 2022.

“She could make paintings 15 feet wide,” says Terry Fenton, former director of the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon and a close friend and fellow landscape painter. She worked the same way, whatever the scale, drawing in charcoal, then painting, then drawing some more. “And then somehow, either through some miracle, if you could hold all this together, she could hold the space together. And she did some amazing things. Just amazing things.”

She leaves her daughters, three grandchildren, friends and extended family.

Sign up for the Evening Update Newsletter

Get caught up on the day’s most essential news with briefs selected by and written by Globe editors.

SIGN UP