

# HUMBLE FOLK:

Barbara Clark-Fleming and Lucy Ogletree





Barbara Clark-Fleming, *Black Cows and Red Barns*, oil on board, 2012

*The more training and the more credentials, the more ability.  
What makes self-taught art so significant is that  
this correlation is broken – indeed, inverted.*

- Gary Alan Fine<sup>1</sup>

# Vernacular Art and the Aesthetics of Rural Canada

By Matthew Ryan Smith, Curator

The more I learn about folk art, the more I have to unlearn what I absorbed in art school. Folk art doesn't fit comfortably within the rigid definitions of art history's canonic movements, styles, and aesthetics. It doesn't, in part, because it has historically been relegated to the bottom rungs of the cultural ladder. Synonymous with "low art," it shares this divine space with other besmirched forms of expression like comic books and street art. Class difference continues to play a significant role in this derisive process. In his notable essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," art critic Clement Greenberg suggests that "formal culture" is the purview of the powerful and cultivated while the "rudimentary culture" of working classes aligns with folk art or kitsch.<sup>2</sup> Traditional folk art has largely been the domain of the poor, rural, remote settler until around 1950 when the conditions of modernity and mechanisation forever transformed how artists worked and what they created.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike other art forms, no one can say for certain what folk art is, which is precisely why it's described by a litany of expressions: "self-taught art," "outsider art," "naive art," "untrained art," "non-academic art," and so forth. The formidable lack of research on folk art discourse in Canada is somewhat to blame for this polysemantic problem. Stepping away from the terminology "folk art" and turning instead towards the designation "vernacular art" helps to explain what happened in the aftermath of folk art since 1950. It also distances itself from serious concerns over nomenclature and the ethical questions embedded in employing words such as "outsider" and "naive." Vernacular art takes into account the civil rights movement of the 60s and 70s, the infusion of Indigenous voices like Allen Sapp and Sanford Fisher, late-stage capitalism, the Internet of Things, secularism, and others. In doing so, it re-evaluates the "aesthetics of the everyday" and the textures of "common experience" towards a shared goal of understanding one of the most popular yet least understood art forms in Canada.<sup>4</sup>

In the exhibition "Humble Folk," the paintings of Barbara Clark-Fleming and Lucy Ogletree conceptualise the transition from traditional folk art to vernacular art. Vernacular art is an approach to art-making where everyday life is treated as content deserving of being monumentalized. Though it can be displayed in the exalted spaces of art galleries and museums, it's equally content resting on a kitchen shelf, tucked away on a bookshelf, hanging in the local Legion, or being sold in a gift shop. It derives subject matter from things like snapshot photographs, old magazines, road trips, Sears catalogues, the internet, family vacations, and Instagram. It is woefully unprecious and can be handled without wearing white gloves. It is the stuff my mother treasures, my uncle appreciates, and my grandmother adored. It exudes a lack of pretentiousness, takes pride in imperfection, and projects humility. It carries purpose in itself. This is the stuff that makes it humble.



Barbara Clark-Fleming, *Team Work*, oil on board, 2008

Clark-Fleming began painting in 1977 as a means of preserving her memories of growing up on her family's 150-acre farm in East Zorra Township, Ontario. "There were no pictures of the house and the barn," she remembers, "and I didn't want to forget it. So, I decided to paint it."<sup>5</sup> Her family's lack of photographs is due, in part, to the fact that she was Old Order Mennonite on her mother's side and pictures were indeed rare. Above all, however, she was deeply motivated to paint as a way to memorialise the joys of spending time with her father, working outdoors and in the barn, doing the things that they both loved together. Everywhere in her work is this extraordinary sense of warmth, care, and admiration for those formative early years.

Though Clark-Fleming was self-taught, her very first painting was entered into the Oxford County Juried Exhibition and received the Award of Merit. Part of the lure of her paintings is their willingness to break protocols while forging a singular visual language. She was not concerned with art school fundamentals like linear perspective, colour theory, clean brushwork, straight lines, or ornate frames. "My style avoids painting straight lines," she writes, "and replaces them with curves and waves."<sup>6</sup>

What also stands out, at least for me, is her profound affection for farm animals, something that was well-known by those closest to her. These animals also play a crucial role in reconstructing her earliest memories. "I was the youngest of three girls and kind of became my father's son," she says, "I spent a lot of time outdoors and in the barn with Dad caring for the cows, horses, chickens, cats and dogs."<sup>7</sup> Evidence of this is inscribed in literally dozens of paintings featuring horse-drawn carriages, Holstein cows grazing on grass, chickens eating feed, or pigs in muck. She often places the viewer where she once stood, or remembers where she once stood, so they too can imagine being in the tall grass, leaning on a fence, watching the sights, sounds, and smells of the farm unfold before them. If the paintings are an articulation of her memory, then we are invited to share in these resplendent, unforgettable moments alongside her.

While Clark-Fleming's work is categorised as memory painting, Ogletree describes her approach as whimsical painting. She too draws on memories of her early life growing up on her family's farm outside Thamesville, Ontario. Also self-taught, her paintings plainly differ in subject matter and aesthetics to Clark-Fleming



Top: Lucy Ogletree, *Trick or Treating at Grandma's House*, exterior house paint on plywood, 2003  
 Bottom: Lucy Ogletree, *Bath Time*, acrylic on MDF board, 2001



through their incorporation of surrealistic illusions of fantastical creatures and dreamlike environments. It's not uncommon to find representations of cats on sleds, accordion-playing spiders, cat/fish swimming in ponds, and bumble bees sewing quilts, which prompt uncanny, almost hallucinatory visual connections. Though the surrealists strove to mine the impulses of the subconscious, Ogletree is more interested in thwarting the tedium of quotidian life in our current Information Age. The work "sweeps the viewer away to enchanting places," she writes, "where things are a bit more friendly."<sup>8</sup> For Ogletree, who visits Sudan to assist children suffering from the effects of war, painting heartening pictures is an elemental means of seeing the good that remains in the world.

From 1995 to 2013, Ogletree's painting practice revolved around Winter Wheat, an immersive vernacular art environment located in Sparta, Ontario. After relocating to London, Ontario, the signature animal figures and lush gardens that defined her work were soon joined by bands of fairies. A long-standing motif of traditional folk art, in all its forms, fairies have influenced numerous works of popular culture, including *Peter Pan*, *Pinnocchio*, and *Pan's Labyrinth*. "The realm of fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things," argues *Lord of the Rings* author J.R.R. Tolkien, "all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords."<sup>9</sup> Tolkien's elucidation is a comfortable fit for the unearthly worlds that Ogletree manufactures from imagination.

Though Clark-Fleming and Ogletree never had an opportunity to meet, their lives matched each other in curious ways, most notably through the persistent influence of farming on their adult lives. In recent years, many rural communities in Canada have undergone a marked decline in population, coupled with an alarming rise in unemployment, crime, opioid addiction, retirement, and more.<sup>9</sup> This is not to mention the myriad of issues facing farmers today, namely rising costs, livestock disease, pollution, soil erosion, bee colony collapse, and corporate farming. After the federal government shutdown the "Rural Secretariat" program in 2013, a bureaucratic arm of the Minister of Agriculture intended to provide a "rural lens" to rural affairs, the challenges facing rural Canada lost its national representative.<sup>10</sup> It's possible that the recent popularity of folk and vernacular art throughout the country, as evidenced by the organisation of exhibitions such as "Maud Lewis" (McMichael Canadian Art Collection), "A Prairie Vernacular" (Moose Jaw Museum & Art Gallery and the Esplanade Arts & Heritage Centre) "Poppa Wilson" (Art Gallery of Hamilton), and this exhibition, coincides with growing threats to rural life in Canada and its fallout on our collective identity. If this is so, then the question becomes: when does an exhibition slip into romanticising a way of life that may no longer be viable?

## About the Artists

Barbara Clark-Fleming was a self-taught artist who grew up on a 150-acre farm in East Zorra Township, Ontario and lived outside Woodstock, Ontario until her passing in February, 2023. She began painting in 1977 to preserve memories of her early life on the farm. She first exhibited her work in the Oxford County Juried Exhibition and received the Award of Merit, which strengthened her resolve to continue painting. Her work is included in numerous public and private collections in Canada, the USA and Europe, including the Museum of American Folk Art in New York City, the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, and the Art Gallery of Greater Vancouver.

Lucy Ogletree is a self-taught artist who grew up in a rural farming community near Thamesville, Ontario where she developed a deep affection for nature, the changing seasons, and a fondness for the simpler things in life. Ogletree has been painting memories of her childhood, her gardens, and her dogs and cats since 1995 and was the co-owner of the popular “folk art environment” Winter Wheat in Sparta, Ontario until 2013. She has travelled extensively to Sudan to organize art workshops for children suffering from the effects of war. In 2012, she was awarded the Queens Jubilee Medal for her work with Canadian Aid for South Sudan.

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### Endnotes

1. Gary Alan Fine, *Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4.
2. Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 16.
3. John A. Fleming and Michael J. Rowan, *Folk Art to 1950* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2012), xiv.
4. Fleming and Rowan, *Folk Art to 1950*, xv.
5. Barbara Clark-Fleming quoted in Nancy Silcox, “The Resplendent Paintings of Barbara Clark Fleming,” Miller & Miller Auctions (5 October, 2020), web.
6. Barbara Clark-Fleming, “Artist Statement,” date unknown.
7. Barbara Clark-Fleming quoted in Nancy Silcox, “The Resplendent Paintings of Barbara Clark Fleming,” 2020.
8. Lucy Ogletree, “Artist Statement,” Personal Website (date unknown), web.
9. J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” University of Houston, web.
10. Aaron Hutchins, “What’s Killing Rural Canada?,” *MacLean’s Magazine* (1 September, 2018), web.
11. Hutchins, “What’s Killing Rural Canada?,” web.



Barbara Clark-Fleming, *Goats and Stone House*, oil on board, 2021

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Cover photo: Lucy Ogletree, *Dresden Fair*, acrylic on MDF board, 2009

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