

Status of Women in the Arts, by Shawna Dempsey, Oct. 26, 2011.

Hello! I bring greetings and congratulations from everyone at MAWA, Mentoring Artists for Women's Art and, as an artist myself, from the larger arts community of Manitoba.

So many negative stereotypes exist about creative types. That artists are lazy, or privileged, or disconnected from reality. That we are financially irresponsible, sexually irresponsible. That our heads are in the clouds. Further, the image of the woman artist is often that of the kept woman, the Sunday painter, the unstable dilettante, the hysteric. When in fact nothing is further from the truth.

These women artists, the women artists you have met today, get their hands dirty. They engage with difficult social realities; they engage with often forgotten populations. They speak the truth, even when it is an uncomfortable truth. They insist on justice. They model justice. By enacting and depicting ideas, metaphors, resonant stories and images, they help us to make sense of our lives. They demand that we ask ourselves, what is important, as individuals and as a society. They help us to understand and accept ourselves and the differences between us. They help us to feel less lonely. To paraphrase the American literary theorist and philosopher Kenneth Burke, they provide us with the "equipment for living."

They are also bravely independent, resourceful and hard working. To be an artist in this country, you have to be. To be a woman artist, even more so.

Sadly, the arts in Canada are not exempt from the wage and opportunity gaps that continues to exist between men and women. The work of women artists is still underrepresented in public art gallery collections. Women fill fewer of the top Executive positions within large public galleries across the country. Women hold fewer tenured positions within university art departments, even though there are greater numbers of women students than men. Women receive fewer public art commissions nationally. And although women make up a higher percentage of practicing visual artists (54%), we have a lower income in the sector. In the most recent year that statistics are available, 2004, the average Canadian male artist earned \$24,400/year from all sources whereas the average

Canadian female artist earned \$13,800/year from all sources. In other words, the average Canadian woman artist earned 58% of what the average male artist earned . In the arts women continue to be disadvantaged.

And yet, despite these barriers, the women honoured today have created and are creating. They are undaunted by the economic realities; undaunted by challenging subject matter and social constraints; and undaunted by fear, for creating is always revelatory and vulnerable, creativity is always fueled by an ever-turning wheel of fear and courage.

Those of us who stand before audiences know this. Those who stand in the studio facing a blank canvas know it too. And yet artists make images and meaning anyway because it is worth the risk. Performers, painters, filmmakers, writers and craftspeople bravely admit, "I am deeply afraid," and yet they sing, string a bead, or make a mark despite that fear. In doing so artists assert: "This is what I believe." This is the essence of creativity. It is a courageous assertion of life and purpose.

And that, more than anything, is what today's award winners exemplify: courage. These women have made something transformative out of nothing, and in doing so have transformed us and our world. They have shown us we can be better. They have shown us our best selves. They have shown us a path forward. This is why art matters. They have created images, gestures and texts that have made meaning for us all.

So how can we support them in this essential, life-affirming task? As a culture, we must support artists and their work financially. For too long, we as a society have tolerated a funding system that means artists live in poverty. We must insist on gender equity in the world. There are many unspoken systems in place that keep women from realizing their full potential and full equality. We must name them and change them. And for future generations of Leahs and Roewans and Buffys, we must support arts education.

Sometimes it seems that we use arts as a holding cell to keep children busy when we find them inconvenient. Children need to experience the satisfaction of reaching difficult goals. And all children, not just a few. We need to advocate on behalf of arts based curricula for all ages in the public schools, so that arts education is not an extra or a pay-per-use privilege.

This is a power that we have, in a democracy. We can ask tell our elected officials what is important to us. We can help set priorities. We can each write a letter or make a phone call, and I guarantee you that collectively our voices are heard.

And finally we need to engage with diversity, not just “celebrate” it, and do the hard and uncomfortable work of learning about and making room for each other. We must recognize all kinds of creativity and artistry, even if it looks a little different from our own.

This is a big job. A necessary job. We have seen, through the work of the women being honoured today, why creative cultures are important. Artists nurture our humanity, reflect our realities and inspire us all to be our best. So it is essential that we sustain the organizations and institutions that make their work possible. That we educate our children. That we foster an environment in which all people can be creative.

Why? Because art matters. This is what these women have taught us. Art can change the world.