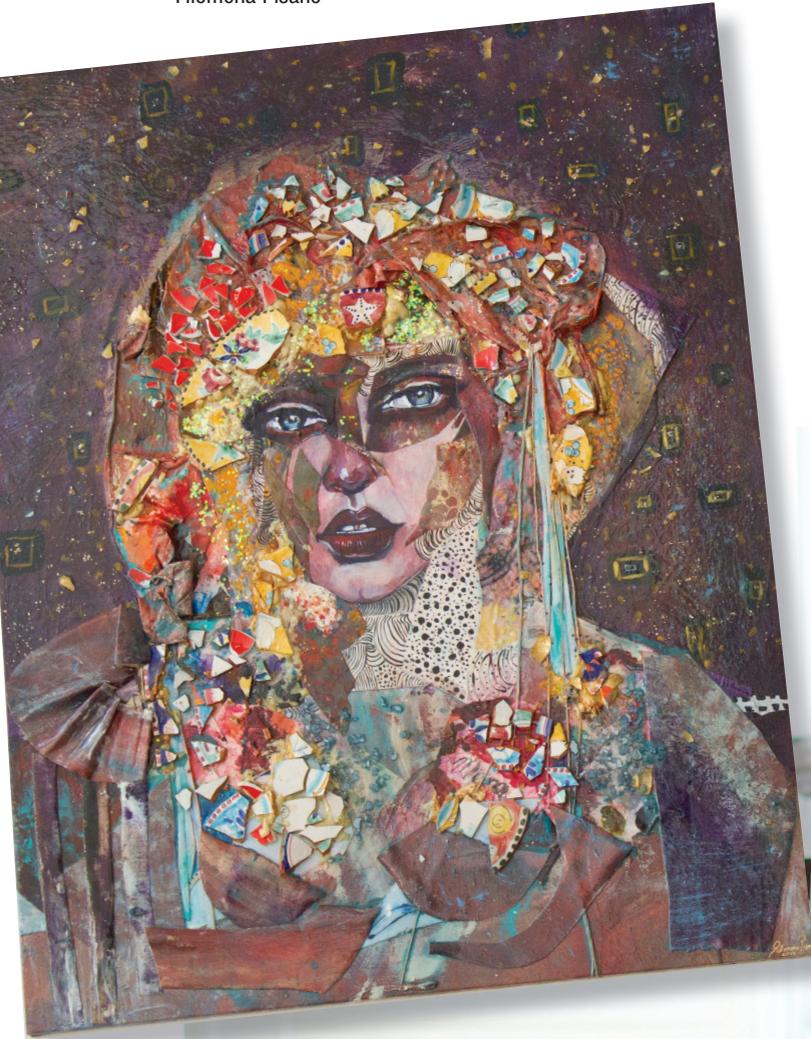


Art that heals and reveals



“Grief humbles me. It softens the edges, makes me kinder, makes me love more, so I don’t frown upon grief.”

Story & Photos by Beth Audet



Those who view Filomena Pisano's body of work might be surprised to learn that at 58-years-old, the Italian-Canadian artist is merely three years into her vocation.

Art was never an option for a child of immigrant parents, she says from the basement studio inside her Niagara-on-the-Lake home. It wasn't considered a viable way to put food on the table, so she was steered toward more practical opportunities – like office work or aesthetics.

New to the scene as she may seem, Pisano has already made several big-ticket sales and her work was featured for two months at the Niagara Image Gallery in Virgil, alongside pieces by notable artists Trisha Romance, Tanya Jean Peterson, Jordan Morrison and Alex Colville.

But the sales and success aren't nearly as important to her as the transformation she experienced once she submitted to the nagging need to create.

"I'm not painting to sell; I'm painting to heal."

As a child, Pisano got in trouble for the phenomenal mess she would make when she tried to paint. As a young student, she was repeatedly reprimanded by the Catholic nuns for drawing one eye, something she'd done since she was 10-years-old.

They told her it was evil.

But as much as she used to deny herself, Pisano remembered occasional periods where she would draw or paint in secret.

"I would be like a closet artist. I would hide it."

One heart-wrenching memory, in particular, remains vividly seared in her mind – the day she stumbled upon the art class in her first year of high school.

Then 14-years-old, she peeked in to see a classroom filled with students attempting to capture the likeness of a nude model draped in fabric and the scene brought her to tears.

She ran from the classroom, telling herself she could never do that. This marked a self-imposed period in her life where she did not feel good enough and experienced regular anxiety, she recalls.

Two significant occurrences ended that.

She was hit in the head by a blue kayak during an outing with her family roughly three years ago and suffered a concussion. In retrospect, Pisano says she suspects this was the moment something that had long laid dormant was jostled to life.

Just two weeks after that, while she and her mother were staying at her sister's house, she jolted awake at 3 a.m. in full anxiety attack and did not have her usual remedies with her.

She did not understand why but she reached for a pad of paper and pencils and began sketching.

Five hours later, her mother found her at the kitchen island in a relaxed state, holding a sketch of a beautiful and familiar face. Without intending to, she had captured the essence of her good friend Alberta.

She became fixated with figuring out how she did that, scouring the internet for stories and videos.

Then she came across comedian Patton Oswalt's story of grief over his wife's sudden death. After 102 days of grief, he pondered what would happen if a person were to spend 102 days doing one thing with the same intensity as one feels depression.

"It was that question that changed my life."

A pact to spend 102 days drawing quickly led to painting and ultimately to experimenting with a myriad of mediums – watercolours, oils, acrylics and gels. In some cases, she incorporated found items like candy wrappers or broken glass.

One of Pisano's most notable pieces was birthed out of a moment of deep sadness and grief.

Within the span of a month she attended three funerals – first for her aunt, then for her uncle and finally for a family friend.

She retreated to her home studio after that third service – still adorned in formal funeral attire – poured black paint onto a large piece of linen that had been on the floor collecting paint droplets and began to sloppily spread it around as she cried and cried and cried.

Her late friend's granddaughter had spoken at the service and Pisano began to recall part of what she told the assembly – how important it is to live your life.

Seeing the dark creation in her hands, she stapled the

fabric to the wall and wondered to herself why grief had to be so ugly. Why couldn't it be beautiful.

She began picking up discarded pieces of canvas and randomly gluing them to the fabric, all the while hearing the words "You've got to live life" repeat in her head like a mantra.

She was so in the moment, creating out of pure emotional purge that she didn't pick up a single brush – the piece was entirely made with her fingers.

It was a powerful experience, Pisano recalled. One that taught her the beauty of embracing grief rather than eluding it.

"Grief humbles me. It softens the edges, makes me kinder, makes me love more, so I don't frown upon grief."

The piece, Viva le Vita, has come to be somewhat of a self-portrait for Pisano, one that is entirely representative of her style – it's chaotic and a little bit messy but there's something about it that captures your attention, she said.

Pisano was always the messy one in her family, she said, the one who couldn't go to a fancy dinner without spilling something on herself.

This trait proved to be a strength as she commenced her creative experimentation, a connection that was not lost on her family. They supported her completely, bringing over tools and supplies and encouraging her to pour her time into her new passion.

"Everyone just kept watering the flower."

Her mother cried when she saw Pisano's entire body of work displayed at the Niagara Image Gallery, saying she couldn't believe she never noticed the natural talent.

That her mom acknowledged and valued her art, she said, was the greatest gift she could have given.

Pisano said she feels more herself than she ever has; her friends tell her she even looks differently now, like an artist.

"I think I came into who I believe I am inside."

Pisano continues to create, sharing snippets of her process and finished products on social media and on her website filomenapisano.com. **nlife**

