

## Painter immortalizes childhood memories on canvas

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VANCOUVER — Many of the subjects of Makiko Kitama's paintings have seen better days. Some have worn the same clothing for a half-century or longer. Others wear nothing at all.

Ms. Kitama, who lives in Gibsons, B.C., paints portraits of what doubters might consider stuffed animals. To her, many are "someone's dearest friends."

Her more than 200 paintings include rabbits, dogs, bears and an occasional pig. Most are not done for children, but for adults who owned the animals in their childhood.

Then there are their stories. A film director who now lives in Australia was a child in London during the Second World War. He and his teddy bear were pinned in the rubble of the boy's home during a Nazi raid. The boy made a pact with his bear. They would be best friends forever if they survived.



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Makiko Kitama works on a sketch for one of her paintings at her home near Gibsons on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast. (*Rafal Gerszak for The Globe and Mail*)



The bear goes everywhere with him, so much so that when friends wanted Ms. Kitama to create a portrait of the bear for him, she had to work from photographs snapped by one of them while the director wasn't looking.

Two of her earliest customers were Whistler residents Steve Podborski of The Crazy Canucks downhill skiers and his wife, Kathy. Ms. Podborski read a brief article on Ms. Kitama in 2004 and said, "I have to do this." She commissioned Ms. Kitama to paint Pink Bunny, the stuffed rabbit that belonged to her daughter Maddi, 16, from childhood. The watercolour now hangs over Maddi's bed.

Two years later, Pink Bunny made a second appearance, when the Podborskis asked Ms. Kitama to paint the rabbit and Tiny Teddy - their son Ben's bear - together. That acrylic painting hangs in a hallway. Ms. Podborski says she still smiles when she sees it.

"I wanted something that could capture the emotions of the bear and the bunny from when Maddi and Ben were children and hold that emotion forever," she said.

Ms. Podborski is active with the Kelty Patrick Dennehy Foundation, which raises funds for teenage suicide prevention. Steve Podborski is a member of the Canadian Olympic Hall of Fame and Canada's Sports Hall of Fame.

Before the Podborskis, there was Emerson Moffat, a century-old bear discovered a decade ago by Bruce Devereux, Ms. Kitama's husband, in the attic of a Vancouver house. It wore a moth-eaten sleeper and remnants of a woollen cape.

Ms. Kitama, 45, had a background of painting people, not bears. But Mr. Devereux, 49, asked her to paint a portrait of the bear, named for a Moffat stove from his childhood.

The artist had met Mr. Devereux in 1998 when she first came to Canada from Japan. After three months, she went back to Japan, but returned to stay in 1999. They were married the following year.

Ms. Kitama doesn't remember a time when she was not interested in art. "There was a family picnic in the yard. I was maybe 5 or 6 and I was drawing something," she said. Initially, she had hoped to be a comic book illustrator.

She graduated from college in 1985 with a major in oil painting, "but I couldn't find design work and I wanted to get back into art."

For more than a decade, she worked as a graphic arts assistant and thought she might find more artistic freedom in Canada.

Each portrait takes 40 to 50 hours, depending on size. Some customers assume that smaller will be cheaper. That's not the case, Ms. Kitama explains, because it can take as long to paint a 40- by 40-centimetre portrait as one twice the size. Her prices start at \$700.

She begins each project with a pencil sketch, "which gives me proportion and feel." She prefers to have the animals at her home, but recognizes that some people are reluctant to give up their bunnies or bears for a lengthy period of time. In such cases, she'll go to the client's home and take photographs from which she then works. Most of Ms. Kitama's customers are from the Vancouver area.

She now concentrates on stuffed animals for her acrylic-on-canvas works, done in front of a west-facing window in the couple's cabin two kilometres north of the Langdale Ferry Terminal. She finds people and animals equally challenging, but says, smiling, that the animals never say 'I don't look that old.'

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