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## La Belle Rêve

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# La Belle Rêve

by Nancy Macko

Artist and academic Nancy Macko finds “gentle stimulation and great peace” during retreat in Brittany.



**L**ast summer, when I mentioned to my trainer, Z’ava, that I would be gone for four months in the fall to live in France on an artist residency in Brittany, she remarked how something like that sounded like the dream of a lifetime. Funny, I didn’t think of it that way at all.

As an artist and academic, the idea of leaving home for an extended time and living in another country to do research seemed normal to me. But her remark made me realize how fortunate I was to be able to go abroad for four months and indeed how special it was to have a sabbatical year to work and renew my art soul.

“You may wonder, why Brittany?”

You may wonder, why Brittany? A few years ago, when I was chair of Scripps’ Department of Art and Art History, I received a call from Los Angeles-based artist Nana Gregory, who is also a board member of the Pont Aven School of Contemporary Art. She asked if she could come to Scripps to introduce their summer program to the students. The images she shared were so beautiful and inspiring that, after her pre-

I think now that she was right. The year has been a dream, a wonderful one; and it could not have happened without the love of my family and my partner, Jan, and the support of Scripps College.

sentation, I knew I wanted to go to Pont Aven. From Nana, I learned about the residency program that is administered through the Musée d’Pont Aven and, with a great translation by Professor Thierry Boucquey, submitted an application.

Our first day in Paris was cool, clean, and spring-like, despite the fact that it was late August and France had just experienced one of the worst heat waves in recent history. Jan and I spent a week in Paris before picking up the car I was leasing for the four months and traveled a bit, planning to arrive in Pont Aven on September 1, when she would return to LA. Following a sensible itinerary prescribed by Professor Eric Haskell, we headed north to visit Giverny, Mont St. Michel, and St. Malo before turning southwest to Pont Aven.

I wanted to have a joyous and full experience, meeting new people and discovering new places, and that is what I found. People everywhere want to be liked and want to be helpful, even the French. They are terribly proud, some would say arrogant, about their culture and language and, as a result, feel no compunction whatever to correct you as you stumble through a phrase or mispronounce a word. I think the notion that they don’t speak English is more that they don’t feel they can speak it perfectly so they prefer not to speak it at all. Since I was at the mercy of any French person I met, I welcomed the language help they provided whether it was a cab driver or a sales person or a waiter. My French, after all, could only improve. (I studied French for five months before I left. Mostly in the car using the Pimsleur Introduction to French 8 CD set.)

As an artist, one examines such things and looks for ways to either express them or at least use the insights as a starting point in one’s work. The real disadvantage to not being fluent

in French was a feeling of being left out of the most simple matters like buying groceries, getting directions, trying to get phone service or just setting up voice mail with a French-only booklet of instructions. I was more isolated as a result of not knowing the language than I had expected to be. At first, I found myself making work that I realized had a lot to do with not speaking the language and a little bit to do with world affairs. Large dark birds wearing chadors appeared in my drawings on paper. At the same time, I was attempting to mimic the visual dialog I observed among the leaves on the footpath in the nearby woods using my colored reinforcements. The birds, like me, had only their sense of sight to interpret and cue into the world. The leaves were talking silently among themselves. I had wanted this sabbatical to give me time to reflect, work and write. The environment provided all that as well as gentle stimulation and great peace.

Pont Aven is a picturesque 18th-century village on the southern coast of Brittany, often referred to as “the nose of France.” The landscape and the people are fresh, untouched, authentic. The landscape reminded me of northern California along the Mendocino coast—rugged yet forgiving terrain. I spent many hours walking along a beautiful and endless coastline trail that paralleled the ocean at Point Trevignon and in the Bois d’Amour forest in Pont Aven, in which the Aven River gently flows toward the sea.

One of my friends referred to this as my rustic French experience. I suppose it was to some degree, but I lived in a comfortable apartment with a generous studio on the fourth floor (walk-up) of the Hotel d’Ville or town hall that was built in 1870. There are four studio residencies in total, and each year in the fall an all-Brittany open studio takes place. I returned from Paris, where my work was included in the Pont Aven School of Contemporary Art’s *10th Anniversary Exhibition* at the Mona Bismarck Foundation, just in time to participate in *Ateliers d’Artistes*, along with the other artists in residence at the time: Yelena Dakovic, of the former Yugoslavia; Christina de Melo, Porto, Portugal; Martine Saurel, Barcelona; and Laurent Brunet, Paris. Fortunately for me, they all spoke English.

Pont Aven has been an attractive site for artists for over a hundred years. Paul Gauguin spent many summers in the Pension Gloanec, where, along with fellow French artists Paul Serusier and Emile Bernard, he developed his school of *synthetique* painting. His famous *Yellow Christ* was inspired by the crucifix that still hangs in the Chapel Tremalo located on the outskirts of the town. 2003 was deemed the “year of Gauguin” all over France, and there were major exhibitions in Paris, Quimper, and Pont Aven.

I took drives to explore the nearby towns and seaside vistas. About an hour south is the alluring town of Carnac, where enormous stones of tremendous weights were moved into alignments over 15 km long more than 8,000 years ago by a people we have no information about. Carnac is also the home of former Scripps Professor Monique Chefdor with whom Professor Dalton Krauss put me in touch. Monique and I spent a wonderful day together driving all over the Carnac and Locmariaquer area. She took me to see menhirs,

dolmen, and alignments that were tucked away in woods and on beaches and that I would never have been able to find on my own. Sprite and energetic, Monique travels and photographs all over the world.

By November, I had a new and unexpected set of windows in my studio. Finally, no more cold air blowing in to this artist’s garret! I started to catch up on my reading—having sent myself a box of books that would be part of a new Core 3 course on feminist utopias I was planning to develop for next

*“I was very aware, not only of what it would mean to have one’s memory change without control over it, but also of the connection between mother and daughter and how these roles are exchanged—often reversed over time.”*

year. I could still communicate with the world via my Internet connection, a land line, and a French mobile phone. But for most of that time, I worked exclusively on the computer creating a new body of work titled *Our Very Lives*. Once I got back into the studio, I developed a body of works on paper that responded to the digital pieces.

These large-scale digital prints and drawings explore ideas of aging and the mother/daughter relationship. Using images of old wallpaper, ancient artifacts from the Cucuteni period (5000-3500 BC) and paint-by-number drawings with the talisman of the bee priestess, these works draw upon notions of

*(continued on page 42)*



**FRENCH CONNECTION:** *Macko explored various towns and attractions in France, including Versailles, during her four-month residency in Brittany.*