

THE HOOKED RUGS OF ALEXANDRYA EATON

Family ties

By Christina Thomson

For over 25 years, Alexandrya Eaton has painted vigorous and vibrant flowers that practically burst forth from the canvas. Big, bold, and beaming, they cannot be contained. It's an exuberance that Eaton is bringing to her latest project involving a surprising new medium.

Eaton's painting style was determined early in her artistic life and her aesthetic has not wavered since. She has painted her canvasses on the floor with thick layers of acrylic paint since completing her studies at Mount Allison University, and drawn and painted flowers from the time she took classes as a child at the Aberdeen Cultural Centre in Moncton. After leaving university, she rented studio space in that same centre with Yvon Gallant, Nancy Morin, and Guy Duguay.

Sharing a studio with such respected artists provided a valuable education in how to survive as an artist. Eaton says the process takes a lifetime of dedication and discipline. These artists all share some similarities in style and approach to painting. Much of the work is bright, joyous, and often has a humorous edge. The discipline is apparent, but so is the fun. Eaton's laughter rings out as she reminisces.

The social bustle of a shared studio is a distant memory now as the mother of two enjoys the

quiet concentration of solo studio time. Eaton's current painting studio fills one bright room in an otherwise empty house. This huge old house is a recent purchase in addition to the family home across town. While it awaits renovations, Eaton takes sanctuary in the solitude of a space filled only with her own creative energy. She spends part of each day here painting. She believes it's important to have a place devoted to work that is separate from home life.

I was also welcomed into the family home to see her latest project: hooked rugs. Eaton chose not to do this work in her painting studio, but to keep it embedded in her home life with her family. Working near the hearth is integral to the theme and medium, both for Eaton and historically. The ancient art of rug hooking has endured for both practical and decorative reasons over many generations. Today, like many other forms of folk art, rug hooking is recognized as a contemporary art practice. Eaton picked it up on her own over 10 years ago.



Drya and Elvis.

Using a traditional medium to communicate a feminist message

Atlantic rug hooking artists Nancy Edell and Laura Kenney both explore the dreams, experiences, and humour of women working in rug hooking. Throughout the 1990s, Nancy Edell created a series called *Art Nuns*, and Kenney's work currently features a character named Judy. I saw their work at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia after my first visit with Eaton and reflected on their shared decision to use this most traditional of media to portray modern women and communicate a feminist message.

Eaton and her dog Elvis lead me to a small room near the kitchen where a jubilant heap of yarns towers over a stack of burlap

squares. On the squares, Eaton has sketched her designs for the rugs. These designs tell the story of her grandmother through image and text. Like her *Busy Woman* series, Eaton's rugs celebrate the strength of women using simplified contours, intensely saturated colours, and energetic compositions. Eaton's insistent theme of a buoyant life force represented through flowers and feminine identity re-emerges in the hooked rugs that are piling up between sheets of protective paper. Eaton's project is very close to her heart. Her designs are distilled by writing and drawing about her grandmother's life.

From life to art

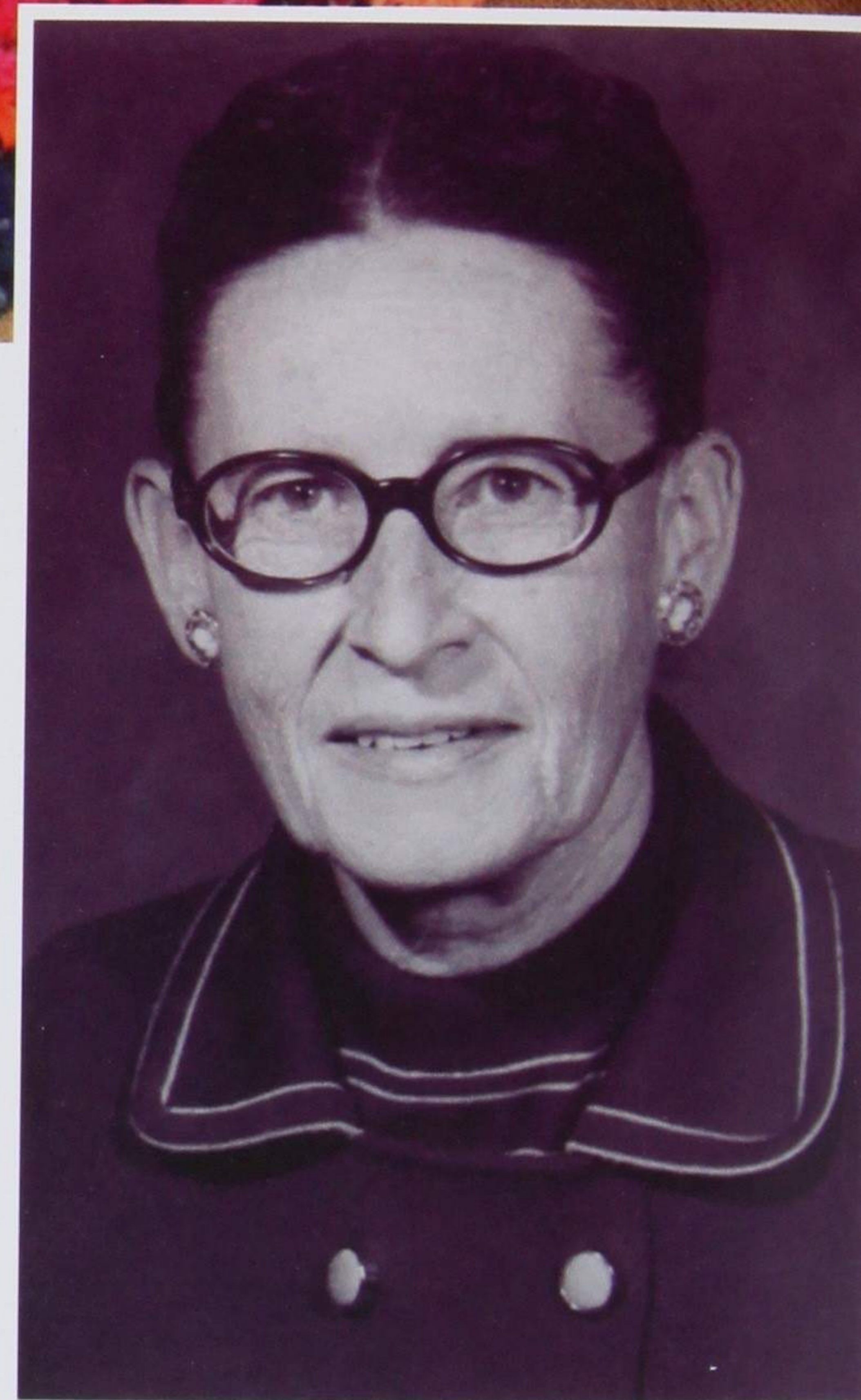
Dr. Elizabeth Cordelia Eaton (known as Grandma or Corrie) moved from London, England, to Amherst, Nova Scotia after marrying a Canadian in 1938. She was the town doctor while her husband was overseas during World War II. She raised six children while working with the Saint John Ambulance. After several decades of volunteer medical work, she rewrote the medical licensing exam at age 60 and resumed her practice. Even after retirement, she volunteered at the hospital and brought her shy granddaughter along to assist. Eaton spent a lot of time with her grandmother: volunteering at the hospital, writing letters to each other when Grandma Corrie headed south for the winter, eventually making the annual drive from New Brunswick to Florida together for several years, and living together after Alexandria's grandfather passed away. "I think those letters were how we really started to know each other as individuals," says Eaton, "because it was a relationship that was just between us."

Eaton spoke with me about the deep connection she had with Grandma Corrie. Eaton was shy and her grandmother was a social force. "It was very important to Grandma that young women, and specifically her granddaughters, know how to be independent, and how to take care of themselves, and to be knowledgeable, and to make informed decisions, and to know how to speak your mind. She was very influential to me. She was the perfect role model." Eaton emphasizes the inner strength that guided her grandmother's actions. "The rug I just finished this week says 'she had a courageous heart', which is also how I started her eulogy. She always seemed fearless to me. It has tulips on it because she loved her garden. Certain flowers immediately make me think of her, particularly forsythia and magnolia."



ABOVE: Portraits of her grandmother.

RIGHT: Dr. Elizabeth Cordelia Eaton, shown at 60 years old.



Artmaking is often a form of thinking, questioning, feeling, and remembering. Eaton has selected photographs from important moments in her grandmother's life to depict in the rugs. "This rug shows her face four times. That photo is from the newspaper when she rewrote her medical exams (in 1970). Her hair was black and she always braided it and twisted it on top of her head. It was very striking."

The slow and repetitive pace of the hooking process lends itself to reflection as Eaton preserves the memories of her grandmother in her mind. This work expresses the journey from girl to woman, then to mother and caregiver for the family and community. By choosing to tell this story through rug hooking – a most traditional



Tactile meditation.



She was not afraid. Drya celebrates her grandmother's courage.

method of women's cultural production – Eaton honours the lineage of “busy women” and unites past and present through the medium. Eaton creates what she refers to as a “safe space” of remembrance through this process. The movements of the body while making art allow thought and emotion to be embraced. Eaton speaks of the privilege of offering end of life care back to a loved one who gave her so much support throughout her own life. This love is embedded in the soft fibres and glows through saturated hues.


The therapeutic process is made manifest through the slow transformation from sketch to textile, seeing compositions become dense with contrasting colours, and watching yarns disappear and re-emerge in textures and patterns. Eaton takes pleasure in the process and is apprehensive of the day when the last rug is finished. She is working through memories, her labour serving as an act of self-care and compassion. The themes she has distilled from her grandmother's life also relate to her own experiences as a woman.

As with her *Busy Woman* series, the work is both personal and universal. “I want to reflect the growth of a woman at various life stages.”

Eaton imagines how the finished work will hang together in a large installation: she has a vision of a suspended bed draped with a massive blanket assembled from dozens of hooked rugs. She wants the work displayed in a way that “demonstrates care”, and perhaps home and comfort. “I want to see the edges hanging freely. I want to show softness.”

The Pop Art aesthetic of Eaton's paintings remains strong in the rugs. She does not use traditional hooked rug imagery and chooses neon yarns over fabric scraps. Like her paintings, these rugs are vivid in the portrayal of everyday iconography. It is no surprise that she loves the work of Andy Warhol, Corita Kent, and Claes Oldenburg. Her bookshelf is full of artist biographies and monographs: Louise Bourgeois, Joyce Wieland, David Hockney. “Art is necessary to who I am emotionally,” she says. “I don't feel right if

I can't paint." The thinking, remembering, and feeling process of artmaking often results in well-being.

Eaton has been told her work makes people feel happy. With this current work, she intends to represent the many qualities women embody and celebrate the "everyday superwoman" through the story of her grandmother. "She really was the most interesting person I've ever known. She was genuine, she was smart, she was brave, she was kind, and generous, she was opinionated, and stubborn, and usually right about everything. Every moment I spent with her was important. And her effect on me is profound. She was more than my grandmother, she was my friend." 

Christina Thomson is a photographer and educator with an appetite for the collaborative creative process. She is the outreach program coordinator at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery and serves on the board of directors for Connexion Artist-run-Centre in Fredericton.

RIGHT: Drya's painting studio, she often works on the floor.

All photos taken in the artist's home and painting studios.

Photos: Christina Thomson, except the photo of Dr. Elizabeth Cordelia Eaton.



