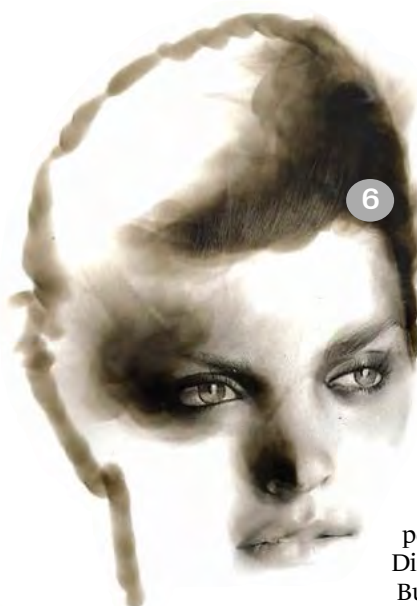
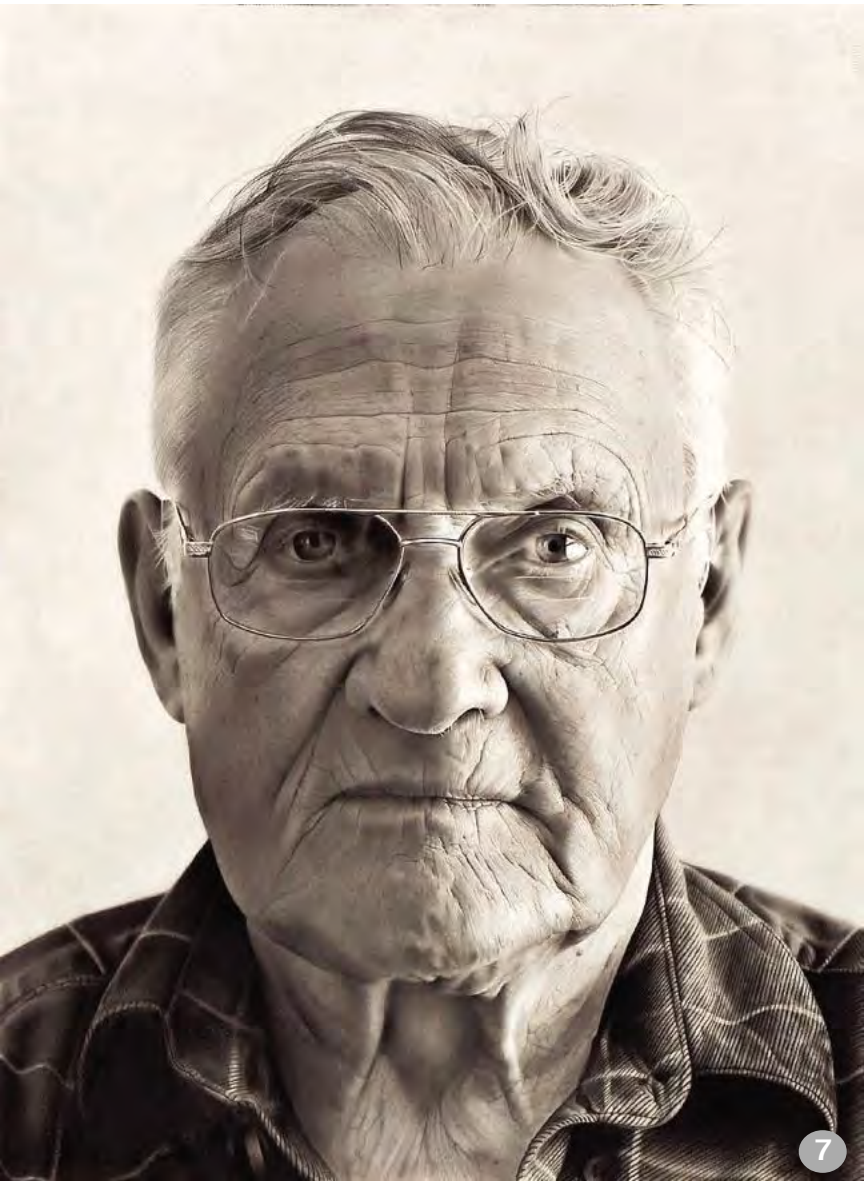


salon focus



An illustration of real life

Dalhousie artist Jessie Babin has been recognized twice in Canada's biennial portrait competition, where hundreds of artists from across Canada enter their best works every two years. Babin received an honourable mention late last year for her self-portrait entry, and was chosen as the recipient for the People's Choice Award in 2013. Her lifelike drawings have been turning heads, and the 25-year-old is just getting started. **By Emma Davie**

When Jessie Babin was young, she sat in her Dalhousie, N.B. home, and like many children, was transported to the Pride Lands of Africa in Disney's *The Lion King*. But something at the end of that VHS tape grabbed her attention, and made it clear what she wanted to do in life. After the credits rolled, the tape included some special features – depicting how the animated movie was made. “That’s when I realized that the cartoons on TV were actually drawings, and that’s when I realized that’s what I want to do,” said Babin.

Fast forward two decades, and it’s no coincidence that in her Kingston Prize runner-up piece, *Self-Portrait*, Babin incorporated a reference to the Disney film, the famous saying “Hakuna Matata” written across the chest of her white T-shirt. It’s not the first time the Dalhousie native has been recognized through the national portrait competition: her drawing of her grandfather, titled *Valmont*, garnered the Kingston Prize’s People’s Choice Award in the 2013 competition.

The Kingston Prize, which has been held every two years since 2005, aims to promote contemporary portraiture and raise public appreciation for Canadian artists. This past year, the three-member jury looked at 414 works from 10 provinces and one territory at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery which hosted the exhibition. The works continue to be on display at the gallery until Jan. 17.

This year, the top prize of \$20,000 went to Jen Mann of Mississauga, Ont., while Babin and Leslie Watts of Stratford, Ont., received honourable mentions and \$2,000 for their works of art.

Her 2015 Kingston Prize entry took Babin about a month to draw, done with graphite – Babin’s favourite tool – and black pencil on paper.

“I just started brainstorming ideas, and then one idea led to another, and then it just kind of fell together,” said the 25-year-old. “I thought, ‘What do I want to say? How about I say my story?’”

And it is a story. Her self-portrait is set on an open book, on its white pages, elements of her life stand out.

“There’s just some sort of comfort thing about it. I find I just know how to use it, it just comes to me naturally,” Babin said.

Filled with mementos such as *The Lion King* T-shirt, it details Babin’s journey of how she got to where she is today. Major milestones

in her life spring up from the book’s pages: a little, iconic lighthouse from Dalhousie, representing her birth place; two lion statues which are found outside the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design campus – where Babin attended from 2008-12; the stately home of Gallery 78 where she works as an artist.

Fredericton artist Glenn Priestley was one of three judges who whittled down the more than 400 entries from across Canada to the 30 finalists, and then chose the winner and the two runners-up at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in November. “It is not always easy to articulate why

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one responds to a particular work of art, but in looking at over 400 images all three judges agreed the work was of note and deserved recognition,” he wrote in an e-mail.

“Jessie has a prodigious drawing ability and her refinement of tone and technique are exceptional. Equally important, in the work she seemed to be commenting on her identity as an artist by creating a self portrait cutout and surrounding herself with images that inform her world,” wrote Priestley, adding the work was technically skilled, imaginative, had self awareness and even some humour.

Along with the references to milestones in her life, Babin’s self-portrait also includes smaller, more intimate imagery.

“Everything has been thought out,” she said.

Her pet cat is perched atop a stool – the way the animal always did when Babin was young. In the left-hand corner of the drawing are three books – *The Complete Tales of Beatrix Potter*, *Alice in Wonderland* and a French-English dictionary.

“Beatrix Potter, those illustrations were probably quite influential, too. They were probably the first illustrated books I ever saw. There’s an Alice in Wonderland pop up book, so that’s where I got the idea for the whole look of that drawing,” said Babin.

“The other one is a French-English dictionary. I’m French, so I tend to use that dictionary a lot.”

Babin skills shine when she mirrors real-life images onto paper – with just graphite, pencil and paper, shadowing, shapes, meanwhile capturing a personality, not solely a person.

Babin says the most important skill she picked up at NSCAD was drawing from life. “It really teaches you to use a different part of your brain,” said Babin.

In 2011, while still in school, Babin competed in the National Artists Program at the Canada Winter Games in Halifax. It was here that she met Kimberly Bent, who works for Fredericton’s Gallery 78, and acted as Babin’s mentor during the Canada Games.

“Jessie was the only visual artist who was chosen from New Brunswick, and there were three artists from each province and territory across the country,” said Bent, who does sales and communications for the gallery in Fredericton.

“Gallery 78 represents over 80 Atlantic Canadian artists and she is one of the younger, newer and up-and-coming artists that we represent now.”

Bent said she was impressed with Babin’s smoke drawings, which involves using a lighter and candle flame to create her images.

“When I was still in school, they would often try to get you to try using something totally different,” said Babin. “I don’t know how it started actually, just playing around with a lighter and some paper and I thought, ‘Oh I like this effect.’”

Babin then uses pencil and eraser to define certain areas of those images.

“She’s kind of an experimenter when it comes to trying things out,” said Bent.

“She’s an absolutely stellar draftsman. She can draw like nobody else we’ve seen, I think. It impresses both those who don’t draw and those who do because she’s just really good.”

After the Canada Games, Bent approached Babin and asked her to consider signing a contract with Gallery 78 once she was finished school.

So when Babin graduated from NSCAD with a major in fine arts in 2012, she did just that.

For three years, Babin produced work for the gallery from a little desk in the corner of her bedroom in Dalhousie.

“I went back home and I stayed there for about three years to try to just totally focus on being an artist. It’s really quiet there, so there weren’t a lot of distractions and I was able to draw most days.”

She has contributed to several exhibitions, such as a themed exhibition for female realist artists in the



Maritimes, as well as doing commission work. “Clients have made special requests of images that they would like to have of their families or whatever, and using the photographs, she has been able to make drawings of the photographs that the clients provide,” Bent said.

Babin’s realist drawings are mesmerizing, and it’s often hard to tell at first glance whether it’s a drawing or a photograph.

“When I was a kid, I tried to draw things as realistically as I could... It is a little obsessive sometimes,” Babin said. “I think I’m getting into what they call hyperrealism.”

The style of hyperrealism, a genre of art that aims to resemble a high-resolution photograph, is evident in Babin’s work. With the portrait of Babin’s grandfather, titled *Valmont*, it seems as though you’re looking at a real person – his eyes stare back, pieces of wispy white hair out of place on his head, every wrinkle in just the right place.

“Lots of people say it looks photogenic, which it does, but it’s not just that. You can tell this person is somebody important to her. She captured his essence,” said Bent.

And that didn’t go unnoticed – Babin received the People’s Choice Award for the artwork in 2013. The prize is awarded on the basis of ballots submitted by visitors to the exhibition.

“Some people I think are really good technically with their drawing skills, but they don’t necessarily do what

she does, which is capture something about their personality, something about the emotional thing going on with that person or with the relationship between that person and the viewer,” Bent said.

Bent said the national competition holds a big weight in the art community, and it’s an honour just to be selected for the top 30 finalists.

“Twice now she’s been selected as one of the 30 finalists, which in itself that’s the first big thing is that you get selected and you get to have your piece shown in at least two different cities in Canada. They do it every two years, so it’s not like it’s happening all the time,” Bent said.

“Then to be chosen or to get a prize amongst those 30 is another honour. It’s very much a feather in her cap.”

Out of all her artwork, Babin said she’s most proud of this year’s Kingston Prize entry – when she turned her attention inward instead of focusing on a subject.

“I put a lot into it and it’s quite different. A lot of times I’m relying a lot on looking at pictures, especially for commissions. So you’re basically just using something that belongs to somebody else,” she said. “But I think my Kingston Prize piece is the one that’s really unique.”

Babin doesn’t know yet whether she will compete in the Kingston Prize again in 2017, and stresses that these pieces require an immense amount of time and effort.

For now, she’s focusing on producing more for the gallery and continuing her commissions. Babin recently moved to Moncton, where she’s settling in to a new, busier work environment.

“I’m lucky that what I do isn’t too messy, so I get my drawing board and pencils and just do what I’ve got to do,” said Babin, who is currently working from her dining room table.

“But I’d eventually like to start painting, so I’m going to have to set up a studio space I can’t be in front of my TV or in my kitchen when I’m painting,” she said. Babin hopes to show her work in Moncton this winter, and Saint Andrews in the summer – but she’s got her sights set on a bigger Canadian city sometime soon.

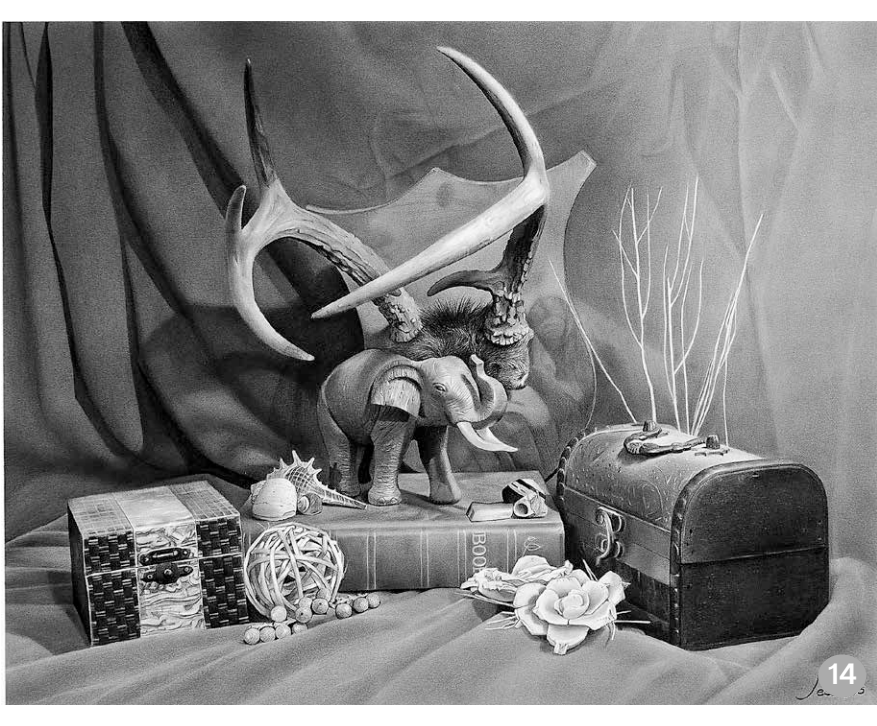
“I think if I was to sign another contract, which the gallery is pushing for, they mentioned Montreal. I do seem to have quite a few followers up there, so Montreal would seem to be like the next smart move.”

Bent will tell you that this is just the beginning of Babin’s artistic career.

“She has the dedication. She’s not only very good, but she’s dedicated and she practices. So she will continue to evolve and she will continue to find opportunities and go after them. She’s not afraid to stretch herself a bit,” Bent said.

“We just see her going places.”

Emma Davie is a freelance writer based in Fredericton



1. Jessica Zelinka, one of Canada’s track and field athletes, graphite and charcoal on paper. PHOTO: ROBERT GERVAIS 2. Chips Ahoy, coloured pencils on paper mounted on wood panel. PHOTO: JESSIE BABIN 3. Mom (Coke bottle), coloured pencil on paper. PHOTO: JESSIE BABIN 4. Smoke Drawing #5 (2013), soot and graphite on paper. PHOTO: JESSIE BABIN 5. Obama, graphite and charcoal. PHOTO: JESSIE BABIN 6. Smoke Drawing #18 (2012), soot and graphite on paper. PHOTO: JESSIE BABIN 7. Valmont (2013), graphite and crayon on paper. PHOTO: ROBERT GERVAIS 8. Sister (Kraft Dinner), coloured pencil on paper. PHOTO: JESSIE BABIN 9. Stones (2014), coloured pencils on paper. PHOTO: GALLERY 78 10. Strawberry, coloured pencil on paper. SUBMITTED IMAGE 11. “Graziella” graphite and black pencil on paper. PHOTO: JESSIE BABIN 12. Jessie Babin sits with her drawing, Sequence, done with charcoal. PHOTO: JESSIE BABIN 13. Self-Portrait, graphite and black pencil on paper was a finalist for the 2015 Kingston Prize. PHOTO: ROBERT GERVAIS 14. Cornes Chevreuil, graphite and charcoal on paper. PHOTO: ROBERT GERVAIS

