



1515 Blanshard Art Gallery, Artist Profile

As part of a continuing series, we feature an interview with an artist whose works are part of the art galleries at the Ministry of Health.



Melanie Spencer

Finding Beauty Through Tragedy

There is no rule for how artists find their inspiration to start creating. For Melanie Spencer, it was the impulse to bid on a series of watercolour lessons at a silent auction 12 years ago that led her to finding her passion. Melanie says she became a watercolour artist purely by accident, as before bidding on the lessons, she had dismissed the style as “mostly flowers and for old ladies.”

After completing the lessons won in the auction, Melanie continued taking classes and learned from a few other teachers over the years. As an educational assistant who works at South Island Distance Education in School District 63 (Saanich), Melanie found herself painting every week, and says she is now completely hooked on the watercolour genre. Melanie’s watercolours take many forms, including landscapes and cityscapes, animals and personal portraits.

Melanie’s Approach to Art

For Melanie, joy and a sense of play are central to how she approaches each work. As Melanie explains, “I find inspiration in adding a bit of whimsy and joy in my work through fun illustrations or colour contrasts.” When it comes to artistic focus, Melanie is drawn to landscapes and West Coast imagery, in addition to having an affinity for animals and birdlife. One of Melanie’s favourite ways to paint is spending a day painting alongside another artist, in what she refers to as an “artist playdate.” As an educator, Melanie says she is fortunate to have summers to paint en plein air to her heart’s content.

Melanie’s Memories of Jari

Last year, Melanie experienced a tragic loss with the death of her only son, Jari, to the ongoing toxic drug public health emergency. Only 29 at the time of his passing, Jari had been working as a custodian in Victoria and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, was taking marine education courses, working towards the goal of being a lighthouse manager. Jari was also an artist, a talented musician who was “able to play guitar, bass, mandolin, ukulele, drums and the piano,” and shared this talent by offering music lessons on the side, including to one of his friends who now plays professionally. Melanie adds that Jari was also very into Dungeons & Dragons, magic cards and video gaming, particularly enjoying opportunities that allowed him to be together with his friends.

Melanie and Jari were very close. They shared passions for walking, cooking, eating together and saw each other every week. Melanie describes the terrible grief of losing her child to the toxic drug crisis and the stigma that comes with that.

“Jari was a sensitive, intelligent and musical person with close friends who adored him,” Melanie says, also noting his struggles with anxiety and depression.



Using Art to Work Through Grief

Melanie describes the initial feeling after Jari’s passing as having a sort of brain fog and trying to function while going back to work. She was reminiscing about all the great memories she had of her son and tried to find a way to process them. Despite being primarily a watercolour artist, Melanie eventually found herself using pencil crayons to sketch some of these memories. In his youth, Jari had been an avid collector of Pokémon and magic cards and had binders full of them. She began sketching out individual memories, one night at a time, in the form of playing cards. Eventually Melanie created a deck of 52 unique cards, with each one showcasing a beautiful and positive memory of her son.

While working on the cards, Melanie found herself learning more about Jari, noting his “creativity, sensitivity, love for nature, and his enjoyment regarding whimsical and magical things.” Melanie also describes her approach in that Jari was a big fan of Japanese anime and that “if he were to create his ideal heaven, it would be an animated world like that.” With that in mind, she used that style in creating some of the memory cards. Melanie notes that the deck she made was not initially intended to be a project or result in anything that she was comfortable sharing publicly. For her, it was just a way to sustain her and help her “turn the grief into a positive, rather than a negative.”

Melanie’s Displays at the Ministry

Melanie would eventually create six decks of memory cards as well as a series of six watercolour portraits of Jari, adding that by doing so, it helped her feel him around her, and his sweetness as a lovely and caring person. One of the decks was organized into an entire display, known as The Jari Project and is currently on display in the gallery at the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions, while some of Melanie’s other watercolours are on display at the Ministry of Health. In addition, Melanie provided the other decks to her grief counsellor. They are now planning to use the cards to show others how she was able to positively deal with her loss to help others process their own grief. Recognizing that each of us processes grief differently and may not “necessarily be able to process that loss in the same way,” as she did with drawing, the cards provide an example, which can support others as they try and move forward.

For Melanie, another reason for choosing to display her works about Jari’s life is to highlight that people who have lost their lives to the toxic drug crisis, like Jari, are loved people with full lives including their own hopes, dreams and aspirations. They have families and friends who care a lot about them and mourn them when they are gone. “Jari is greatly missed by his friends and family,” Melanie says, “he was a multi-faceted, sensitive and intelligent person, and his death was a huge loss for all who had the joy of knowing him.”

The Importance of the Ministry Galleries

Being able to have these pieces highlighted in the ministries’ galleries means so much to Melanie, as she hopes to “bring some joy to people with my work, and some awareness of the deep grief parents are feeling at the loss of their children.”

As Melanie details, the main reason she chose to share her story is that she wanted to focus on her memories of Jari and the processing of her grief and loss through her artistic expression.

Melanie hopes that, in displaying her works of Jari, others “will be able to witness the valuable person that he was.”



Stigma and Overdose Prevention

When it comes to substance use, stigma may make it harder for people to access life-saving care. It may prevent them from reaching out for support – due to fears of judgement, shame or rejection. Increasing our understanding of substance use can help build compassion and help people feel safe and respected when reaching out for help. Learn more at [StopOverdoseBC.ca](https://stopoverdosebc.ca).

Toxic drugs are circulating throughout B.C. People are losing their loved ones every day – family, friends, neighbours, co-workers. Overdoses can be prevented. [Learn ways to stay safer](#). Find more information about harm reduction supports, treatment and recovery:

- » Learn about [supervised consumption, overdose prevention, and drug checking services](#) available in many areas throughout B.C.
- » Learn about [treatment and recovery](#) and what supports are available.
- » Learn about [Opioid Agonist Treatment](#) and find [clinics that are accepting new patients](#).

See also [Gone Too Soon](#), a guide that helps people who have lost loved ones as a result of substance use navigate grief.

We welcome your input and feedback. Contact us at: MOHNewsletter@gov.bc.ca