



Images courtesy of Pam Hall

ART IMITATES NL LIFE

BY KRISTINE POWER

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND TRADITIONS LEAP
OFF THE PAGE IN A NEW ENCYCLOPEDIA
THAT IS ANYTHING BUT TYPICAL.



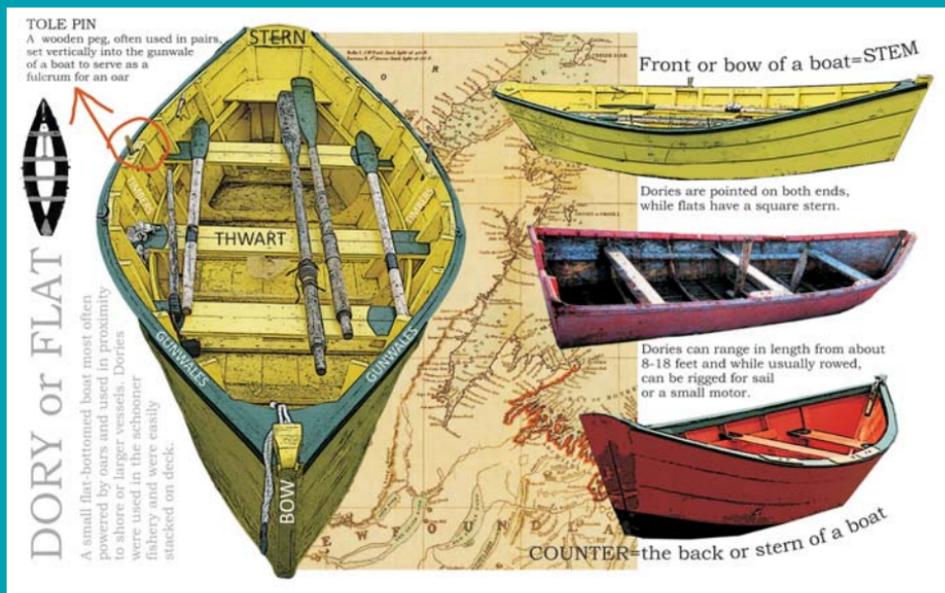
JUST ABOUT EVERY home has them. Perhaps they sit on a dusty, seldom-used bookcase or tucked away in a box in a dark corner of the attic. Encyclopedias, it seems, have gone the way of the dinosaur since the Internet age took hold. But the Encyclopedia of Local Knowledge – a recent project undertaken by contemporary artist and academic Pam Hall – is definitely not attic-bound.

The 92-page encyclopedia sets out to record Newfoundland and Labrador's rural traditions by reinventing the old-fashioned learning tool. Through extensive interviews with local experts on topics such as ecology, fishing and baking, Hall forgoes the endless pages of tiny print typically found in encyclopedias and presents bold, colourful illustrations that are a testament to the importance of being curious about the unique and dynamic culture surrounding us.

“My work as a scholar and an

artist begins with the assumption that everyone knows something interesting and important about where they live and how they live there. My goal is to make that knowledge visible so it can be shared and used within and beyond communities where it emerges,” writes Hall in her PhD thesis “Recruiting the Visual: Knowing our Commonplace Towards an Encyclopedia of Local Knowledge.”

Hall is deeply rooted in the artistic world of this province as a visual artist, filmmaker and writer. Her



award-winning illustrations in Al Pittman’s *Down by Jim Long’s Stage* mark the beginning of a prolific career that is as varied as it is celebrated. Her latest project could be considered the culmination of her career thus far – it combines her well-trained eye for the visual world with a profound respect for the province’s culture and history. Hall calls her encyclopedia a collaborative art-and-knowledge project that brings marginalized, practice-based knowledge found in traditional culture to the forefront.

ART IMITATES LIFE

To complete the project, Hall spent more than five months over a three-year period collaborating with over 80 people (“knowledge-holders,” as

Hall refers to them) from more than 20 communities on the west coast of Newfoundland and the Great Northern Peninsula. It could take as many as 60 formal interviews on one topic such as boat building or making snowshoes to cover a specific topic in the encyclopedia.

From there, her well-established artistic processes took over: “I have worked with image and text for many years as an artist...so I have an old and well-established methodology, which is a back and forth conversation between image and text,” says Hall.

The result is unlike any traditional encyclopedia. It is a unique hybrid of words and imagery that somehow captures the beauty and knowhow of the everyday things that make up

TRIGGER MITTS: these mittens have an additional "trigger" finger to make working in the woods or on the water easier.



Many Newfoundland women knit without patterns or charts. Learning as girls or young women (mostly through observation experimentation and practice) they work from memory and experience. Some knitters will write down their patterns so they can share them.

Rita Fillier in Main Brook and Mary Jane Simmonds in Conche both report that if they see something they like, they will "count it off" or just "go home and try it." Knitting knowledge moves around that way, from knitter to knitter.



Knitting Knowledge:
what the hands remember



Elsie Howell of Norris Point often makes up "patterns" as a way to use up leftover bits of wool. She improvises. She is "at the hand-work" whenever she has a minute and knits mitts and socks for all her children and grandchildren. Her grandson yanked off his rubber boot to show me the socks his Nan knit. They are his favorite pair.

life in rural communities.

Baking bread, knitting and methods of fishing, just to name a few, are all presented as practical entries with instructions, but Hall also captures the art of the practice of these activities, as well as the pride of the informants from whom she collected the data.

According to Joan Simmonds, Manager of the French Shore Historical Society, there was a certain hardened cynicism towards academics coming and interviewing

local elders in communities like Conche because, traditionally, this information was taken and never made it back to the community in any form for anyone to see. This project was clearly different from the get go.

"Pam blew into the community like a fierce wind and became one of us," says Simmonds. For 35 days in the fall of 2012, Hall took her encyclopedia back to the communities where she gathered her information, and presented copies to share and



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HOW TO SALT COD

1. First gut the fish, remove the head . 2. Split the fish. Cut along the backbone and remove it. Wash the fish.
3. Open up the fish flat with the skin side down, then layer the fish with heavy salt and store it in a cool place.

A well salted and dried fish is firm, easy to handle. It will last in a cool dry place for months.

Before it is dried- salt fish in brine is known as GREEN FISH or SALT BULK



Too much. Hot weather will spoil fish.

To prepare a salt cod for cooking, water the fish overnight (i.e. soak it in water) to remove some of the salt. If heavily salted the water must be changed before or while cooking, sometimes more than once.

5. TO DRY fish, remove it from the brine and spread it in dry, windy weather for four to five days.

6. Store in a cool, dry place until ready to use.

4. Leave it for four or five days for a light salt and 21 days for heavily salted.

celebrate as part of a travelling interactive exhibit so her collaborators could also revise and edit individual pages.

The project continues to be a profoundly moving experience for community members who witness their contributions on the pages of the encyclopedia in such an arresting and unexpected way. Hall transformed local knowledge into an art form that tells a cultural story. “I was blown away by the visual effects, but also how she is focused on education...she is keeping this stuff alive,” Simmonds says.

Hall’s intention is to continue to make the encyclopedia accessible

through public exhibitions, a digital version online, and a wiki website so that collaborators can continue to update and share information.

A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT
 “Working with others in a community, or public practice like this project, is much more challenging than staying alone in your studio and not being responsible to other people...Nobody participates with me in any kind of project where I am representing anything of theirs – their photograph, their information, anything – without knowing they can withdraw it or approve it before it goes public. That is the first conversation that turns people into

collaborators,” explains Hall.

“It is important to me for people who live in a place, who care about their place and who actually know a huge amount about it, are aware that they know a huge amount about it. Often people would say to me, ‘That’s not really important,’ and I’d say, ‘Actually, here is one way you might look at it that (you) would see it as important.’ It’s not that it’s important that snowflake mittens never stop being made, it’s important that when someone wants to know how to make some, there is a place.”

Joan Ritchie, director of the Centre for Newfoundland Studies at Memorial University, says one of the most unique aspects of Hall’s encyclopedia is her ability to remind us of the many precious types of knowledge worth keeping and holding onto in a tangible way by recording them so they can stand for all time. The Centre has exhibited pages of the encyclopedia for students, faculty and staff. “It is clever of her to simply make us look and feel,” says Ritchie.

While there are lighter aspects to

the encyclopedia in that it is accessible and generous with its information, it also contains a cautionary warning: “We make a horrifying mistake by not being curious about other ways of knowing or to dismiss knowledge because it is not written and instead embedded in a rural community that may or may not be dying...We are losing our knowledge about this place that we are a part of...the less we know about it, the less we feel a part of it.”

The Encyclopedia of Local Knowledge will be part of an exhibit called “Changing Tides: Contemporary Art of Newfoundland and Labrador,” at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario from January 25 to June 1, 2014. At the Rooms Provincial Art Gallery in St. John’s, N.L. in the summer of 2014 is Hall’s “Building a Village” exhibit that explores the notions of community in a truly global world. More than 400 paper houses were sent to countries all over the world, where they were personalized and then returned to Hall for her exhibit. ☒



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