

CANADIAN HYPERREAL PAINTER AND RETIRED PSYCHOLOGIST SHERYL LUXENBURG SAYS THAT TIME IS UP TO SPEAK OUT ABOUT A CRIME OF OPPORTUNITY

FROM PAIN TO PAINT

I was born and raised in Montreal, Quebec and moved to Ottawa, Ontario after receiving two graduate degrees in clinical psychology at McGill University and The University of Ottawa. I spent two decades working as a clinical psychotherapist and specialized in family systems and trauma. I also worked as an expert witness in trauma and sexual abuse cases in the Ottawa court system.

After being diagnosed with Collagen Vascular Disease, namely Systemic Lupus in the late 1990s, I decided to leave the profession. In the previous decades I had always explored my passion for painting. Throughout my childhood and well into the mid 1980s, I received fine art training at Concordia University, Keene State College and The Banff Centre For The Arts, but decided to pursue a clinical psychology career rather than fine art as a more stable way to generate an income. After I retired from being a psychotherapist some 24 years ago, I decided to paint full time.

Through the years my subject matter has combined a lifelong interest in clinical psychology with a passion for fine art. More specifically, my work has revolved around people or objects that experience some type of distress, such as confusion, dread, conflict, anger or numbness. Emotions related to feeling overwhelmed, useless or abandoned have also played prominent roles within my compositions. I had an epiphany 20 years ago when I realized that my subject matter was a direct projection of the psychological struggles I was having in my life.

To celebrate an approaching milestone birthday in 2018, I designed and began painting a triptych called 'To Everything There Is A Season'. Each panel is 3x6ft and I used acrylic paint with charcoal on linen canvas. The subject is about survival, transformational growth, recovery and healing. Most importantly I want to use the painting to raise awareness for the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements because I am a sexual incest survivor and have never spoken publicly about this before.

The painting shows three topless figures on a cement wall which represents the past. The arm gestures are clearly communicating 'Do not touch my breasts!', while the central figure standing life size represents survival.

I came from a highly unstable home. My parents married young, my mother age 19 and father age 23. They were unhappy from the beginning of their marriage. My mother emotionally left the marriage early on as she would leave the house every night. This left me home with my father who for as long as I can remember sexually abused me in the form of trying to touch my breasts. This type of incest was all I ever knew, and being born into it I never knew it was wrong, even though it felt extremely uncomfortable. I was born in 1954 and no one ever spoke of such things. There were no Canadian laws protecting children from such abuse until 1988, when changes to the Canadian Criminal Code and the Canada Evidence Act specified what constitutes child sexual abuse offences. These new laws expanded the opportunity for courts to receive children's testimony.

My parents finally divorced when I was 13 years old and the abuse intensified during weekly custodial visits. In fact the abuse continued until I was well into my 30s, married and with a child. As the years passed, the secrecy I was carrying felt hypocritical because as a professional mental health

practitioner, I was trained in the mandatory reporting abuse to the authorities and would do so when the occasion would arise in the course of my professional duties.

For not one moment in my life have I ever doubted that my father loved me, but I also and more importantly have had to acknowledge that he horribly exploited his position of power as a parent. I never confronted him during his lifetime and he passed away in 2015.

I was brought up and groomed to feel sorry for my father. I tried to remain strong and ambitious to carry on with my life. I had friends and did well in school. I distinctly remember never wanting to return home and would stay for entire weekends in the home of my best friend. I remember feeling physically self conscious, but never knew why. In fact I didn't realize how psychologically damaged I was until decades later in the late 1990s. My father always acted as if he genuinely loved me, but as my parent's marriage fell apart, I became his confidante. Understandably my father was devastated by my mother's rejection and he was lonely. As I grew to be an older teen and young adult, I became aware that this grooming was a distraction from the fact that he was objectifying my body for his pleasure. With the help and support of my husband, safe people, my psychology training, a few decades of distance away from my father, and psychotherapy, I have worked hard to find the freedom from the confusion and entanglement of this highly upsetting situation.

Given my clinical psychology education in the 1970s, I was trained to use DSM which is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders, a classification system of officially recognized disorders, published by the American Psychiatric Association. This manual is used by all mental health professionals to ensure uniformity of diagnosis. As I became well educated about personality structure, emotional functioning and anxiety disorders, I came to realize that my father had been suffering from a mental health condition revolving around a generalized anxiety disorder and a cluster of behavioural disorders associated with the impulse disorders, namely Compulsive Sexual Behaviour Disorder. This new-found knowledge provided a greater understanding into my father's psychopathology, but I must confirm that no amount of compassion will ever exonerate him from his criminal wrongdoings. To this day I have to live with the fact that he had been committing an indictable offence for all those decades and it went unreported.

In 2002 I chose to tell a few family members and close friends about the abuse. I received loving support from everyone, but have never gone public until now. My attitude changed when I learned about the American #MeToo and #Time's Up movements. The victim, the psychotherapist and the artist in me began to realize that if I was to support and encourage all sexual abuse victims to speak up, I would need to use my voice and my art to share my story.

I am writing this today in the hopes that anyone who reads this article, has had a similar experience and has never spoken up, will have the courage to do so. Please speak up, tell someone and receive professional help if you need to.  
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<https://www.instagram.com/luxenburgsheryl/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/sher.luxenburg>

## An interview with

# Sheryl Luxenburg

An interview by **Dario Rutigliano**, curator  
and **Katherine Williams**, curator  
[arthabens.biennale@europe.com](mailto:arthabens.biennale@europe.com)

Hello Sheryl and welcome back to ART Habens. We had the opportunity to introduce our readers to your artworks in our previous special edition released in 2019, and we are now particularly pleased to discover the development of your artistic production.

We would like to invite our readers to visit your social media sites.

<https://www.sherylluxenburg.com>

<https://www.instagram.com/luxenburgsheryl/>

<https://www.facebook.com/sher.luxenburg>

ART Habens would like to focus on your triptych entitled *To Everything There Is A Season*. The dimensions consist of three six-by-three foot panels, acrylic on linen. This project took two and one half years to complete. How did you begin this journey to paint something larger in scale than you are accustomed, and why did it take such a lengthy period of time to complete?

**Sheryl Luxenburg:** Thank you so much for all your support. This project never would have been possible without the support from an important international private collector from Germany. Albrecht von Stetten, chairman of The Ibex Collection, is described as a leading world collector of super realistic contemporary figurative work. He had been travelling the globe since 2013 to find the most talented painters from around the world and support their work, intent on helping them to develop the highest profile in the art world.

About five years ago, Albrecht contacted me in the hopes to buy a few of my paintings. Upon closer inspection of my works and developing a close relationship with me, he later



Sheryl Luxenburg

wondered whether I might be interested in participating in the Ibex Masterpiece Project. His idea was to select about 25 or so of the most accomplished painters in his collection, and provide them with the financial resources for them to create something more special than they had ever created before. The plan was to then showcase the works around the world with an exhibition beginning in New York City. I was honoured to be invited, but because I was one of the later

painters to be invited, I knew I would need more time. I had learned that all the masterpieces took between two and one half years to upwards of five years to complete.

I asked Albrecht what dimension he expected of me and he sent me the list of everyone's dimensions. I got out a calculator and simply decided to design the dimension to the mathematical mean. I also had to consider my limited studio space and believed I could more comfortably handle three panels, each at six by three feet rather than six feet by nine feet.

You ask why did it take two and one half years to complete? There are two reasons for this. First and foremost, is that an Ibox project demands the highest level of precision and technical skill. One needs to pay incredible attention needs to the minute details, and all planning stages need to be clearly communicated. Secondly all design, preliminary drawings and all painting stages need to be recorded and sent to Ibox via a dropbox system at each interval. There is considerable administrative work beyond the studio work. The dropbox method is recorded for educational purposes at a later date and to fully honour the painter's ideas from beginning to end.

So, Albrecht certainly placed a fire under me to undertake such a project, but with the COVID19 pandemic and the Ibox Collection having to close their doors due to restricted international travel, it remains to be seen whether the project will eventually land up in the collection. The Ibox Collection executive need to see the final project in person to be assured it conforms to their strictest levels of performance. So much is up in the air.



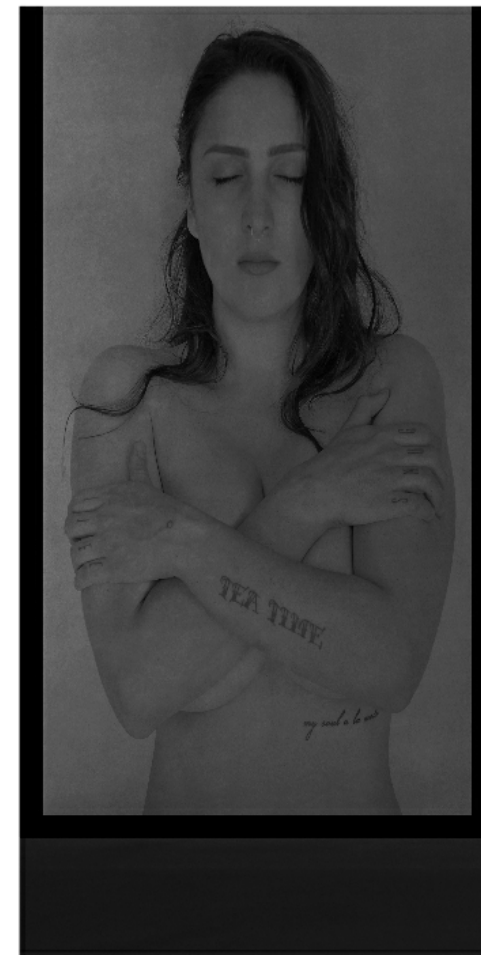
### To Everything There Is A Season

**To Everything There Is A Season is a particularly important project, in fact you have stated several times, it has been 'your project of a lifetime'. Why was it so important for you to create this project which relates strongly to your professional education and experience as a clinical psychotherapist as well about a**



**topic that you have unfortunately personally experienced?**

**Sheryl Luxenburg:** I had the support of the Ibox Collection and had otherwise been receiving international attention, so I was confident I had the platform to be able to paint



this triptych and use the work for activism purposes. The Ibox Collection was fully supportive. During the initial invitation to join the Ibox Masterpiece project, I was soon approaching a milestone birthday, so I decided to as they say, go big or go home. I decided to work on a masterpiece that would further



### MIXING PIGMENT

enhance my technical skills, and with all the preoccupation to make the most intrepid statement possible.

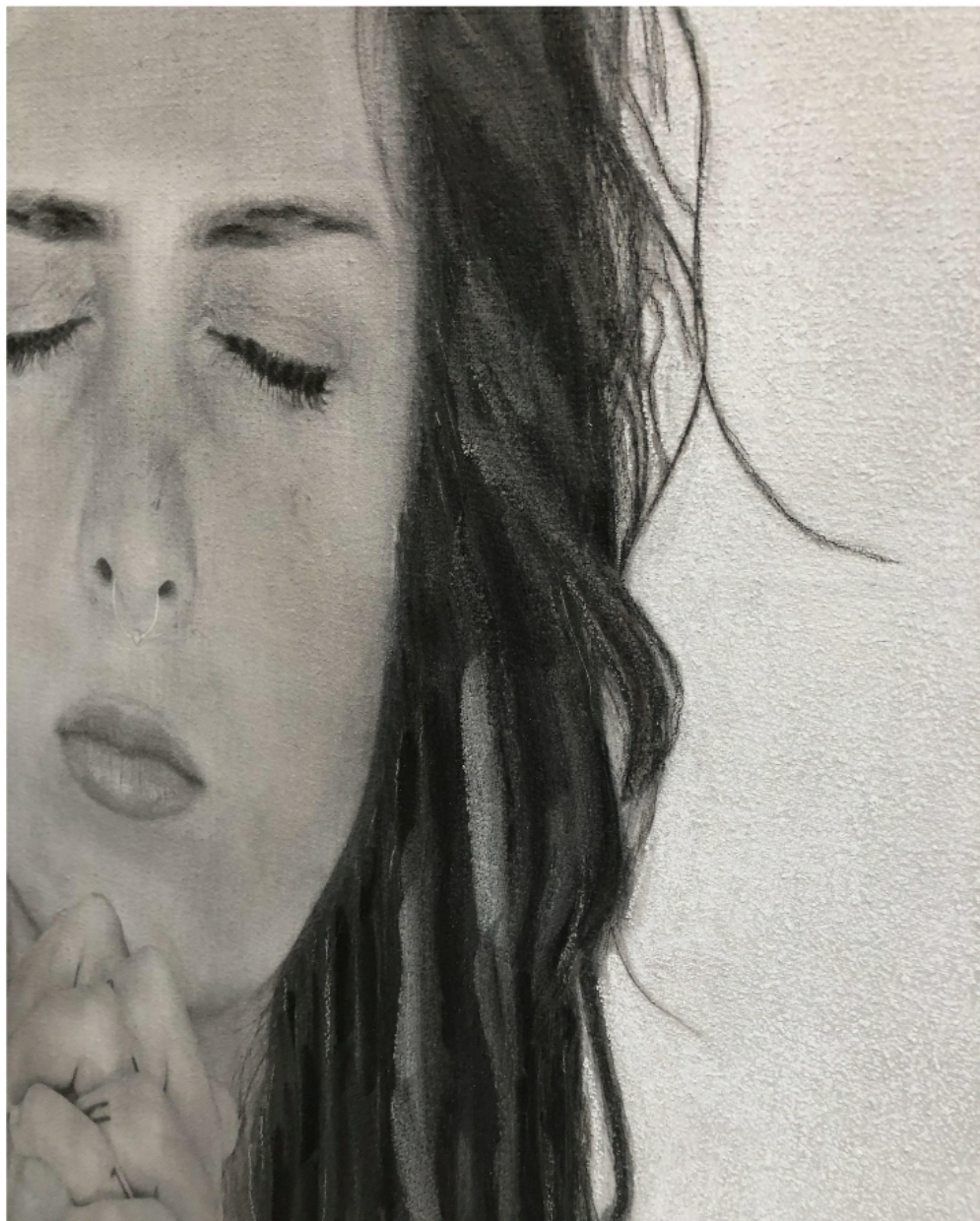
**Have you ever previously painted a work which served as the inspiration for the cre-**

**ation of the triptych?**

Yes, in 2007 I painted an acrylic on linen painting, eighteen by twenty four inches called, *The Best Of Me*. It had to do with surviving a few heart attacks earlier in 2007. These cardiac events were very challenging



PREP FOR UNNI'S TORSO, FOR TO EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON, WATERCOLOUR AND INK



BOTTOM LAYER ROUGH CEMENT WALL AND HAIR LEFT PANEL

to overcome both physically and emotionally and I wanted to celebrate survivorship with this work.

**Would you tell us something about the cathartic aspect of the project because as an experienced psychotherapist and a fine artist, I imagine you intentionally considered the therapeutic value of speaking up.**

**Sheryl Luxenburg:** Yes, I understood the therapeutic value was long overdue. I came from a highly unstable home. My parents married young, my mother age 19 and father age 23. They were unhappy from the beginning of their marriage. My mother emotionally left the marriage early on as she would leave the house every night. This left me home with my father who for as long as I can remember sexually abused me in the form of trying to touch my breasts. This type of incest was all I ever knew, and being born into it I never knew it was wrong, even though it felt extremely uncomfortable. I was born in 1954 and no one ever spoke of such things. There were no Canadian laws protecting children from such abuse until 1988, when changes to the Canadian Criminal Code and the Canada Evidence Act specified what constitutes child sexual abuse offences. These new laws expanded the opportunity for courts to receive children's testimony.

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24x35 1/4"  
Middle Background  
Correct Scale  
Charcoal + Pencil  
Copyright Luvology



24x35 1/4"  
Right Background  
Correct Scale  
Charcoal + Pencil  
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**Can you describe the aesthetic choices you made in conceiving the triptych? As well, why did you decide to dispense with colour and choose a unique monochromatic feature?**

**Sheryl Luxenburg:** The triptych is meant to portray a street scene. The background is meant to portray a cement wall with 3 por-

traits of a topless woman covering her breasts. The covering of the breasts are a defensive yet assertive stance saying no to abuse. The viewer cannot see the breasts in order to protect her privacy. The 3 portraits embedded into the inanimate cement wall is to show that trauma occurred in the past and belongs in the past. The metaphor of the inanimate wall means it is not alive and doesn't belong in the present. There is intentionality to separate the past from the present.

Given I specialize in a flattened depiction of space, which intentionally lightens the subject around the perimeter of each shape highlighting a 180 degree view, and whereas in regular realism the shading is darkened around the perimeter to illustrate a 360 degree view, I used a regular realism method for the background figures and a flattened depiction of space for the life size figure. The animate figure standing life size on the street shows survivorship. The interplay between regular realism and the flattened depiction of space realism worked well because it accentuated the contrast between the background figures and the foreground life size figure.

The background figures symbolize not only surviving incestuous sexual abuse at the hands of my father but also in surviving several heart attacks due to Systemic Lupus. All these situations were a challenge to live through and it has taken me a couple of decades of positive strength to recover. The black border around each panel was created in order to punctuate and honour survivorship. I decided to dispense with colour and go monochromatic because I felt it



**BOTTOM LAYER TWO HEADS OF HAIR CENTRE PANEL**



CLOSE UP CENTRE PANEL

strengthened the message I wanted to deliver.

**As I have reviewed your work over the years, I notice that you leave few elements to chance or mere aesthetic complacency. I would go as far in saying that your artworks are similar to architectural structures, each element be they transparent shower glass which speaks of isolation, or dripping water as a metaphor for tears and cleansing, you deliberately use symbolism to strengthen your powerful allegories. In *To Everything There Is A Season* your communication appears even more poignant as the arm gestures are clearly communicating 'Do not touch my body' and the central figure standing life size presents with a rather defiant demeanour. How did you develop this aspect and why did you leave even less room to interpretation and ambiguity?**

**Sheryl Luxenburg:** I did not want to leave anything to ambiguity. I had been struggling for decades with having to keep my feelings bottled up, and I wanted to publicly state that sexual abuse is a criminal offence.

**As you remarked to us a few years ago, you had an epiphany two decades ago when you realized that your subject matter was a direct projection of the psychological struggles you were having in your life. Therefore it makes complete sense that the subject of *To Everything There Is A Season*, taken from The Bible is about survival, transformational growth, recovery and healing. This aspect of your approach reminds us of the ideas behind Rebecca Horn's artworks 'to create art that throws a lifeline to whom creates it, and that at the same time provides the viewers with a deep moral compass'.**

**Sheryl Luxenburg:** As you reveal great wis-

dom and self awareness of reality, your artistic production has again attracted our attention for its multilayered quality. Besides being incredibly eye-catching for its irrefutably aesthetic features, your paintings challenge the viewers' perception, urging them to overcome the dichotomy between what may be a painting recreated verbatim from your photographic source material, and what belongs instead to the realm of imagination and exaggerated fiction. Switching between photo-realism and expressionistic hyper-realism, how do you play with the tension between the real and the imagined? In particular, why is it so important for you to give life to images where you are able to create the illusion of reality in order to communicate your emotions?

My fine art education from the late 1970s through the mid 1980s fostered the development of my photorealism skills, but in the last twenty five years I have become more interested in playing with the exaggeration of reality.

**Your personal story reminds us of a quote by artist and poet Max Ernst when he underlined that 'every human being and not merely the artist has an inexhaustible store of buried images in the subconscious, and that it is merely a matter of courage or liberating procedures of voyages into the unconscious, to bring pure and unadulterated found objects to light'. How do you consider the role of your subconscious in your artistic process?**

**Sheryl Luxenburg:** When I initially designed this project, I believe I did so for the most part with conscious intention. Because I had never spoken up before about the abuse, I wanted to be sincere and forthcoming. Only



STRAND

Ma Lobster RESTAURANT KENNEBEC

Liquitex PROFESSIONAL GLAZING MEDIUM MEDIUM FINE CLAY MEDIUM FINE VOLUMEN 946 mL

Golden Glaze

Straight Glaze

White

OPEN OPEN OPEN OPEN OPEN OPEN

NO. 17

Small text on a notice or document pinned to the wall.



towards the end of the design stage did I realize that in portraying the characters, I had unconsciously been also trying to acknowledge the fact that I have survived a few heart attacks due to Lupus in 2007. The figures embedded in the cement wall is a symbol of this life threat.

**British artist Chris Ofili once stated ‘that the studio is a laboratory, not a factory. An exhibition is the result of your experiments, but the process is never-ending. So an exhibition is not a conclusion’. What should we expect as a next step from your artistic production?**

**Sheryl Luxenburg:** I think we can expect more of the same, continuing with the aftermath of speaking up and what that looks like in my life.

**It is important to remark that you want to use this project to raise awareness for the #Me-Too and #TimesUp movements. We deeply support the way *To Everything There Is A Season* draws from your personal feelings of upset and struggle, and it is wonderfully educational that you have found a way to transform your pain to paint in order to create this powerful proactive force. Experiences such as sexual assault leave us with a sense of disbelief, confusion and outrage. Sharing ones story about abuse and then what survival looks like can serve as a role model for others hurting. It is our honest opinion that we find your artistic production as highly unique because it breaks the barriers of language to create an opportunity for universality.**

**Sheryl Luxenburg:** Thank you for all your support. I truly appreciate it. The project has been ongoing, a gift that keeps on giving. From the time of its release in late 2020,



**THE BEST OF ME, AFTER 4TH HEART ATTACK**

many people in the public have come forward writing me emails, telling me that they read the project, and have now found the courage to speak up and get professional help.

*An interview by **Dario Rutigliano**, curator  
and **Katherine Williams**, curator  
[arthabens.biennale@europe.com](mailto:arthabens.biennale@europe.com)*



**CLOSE UP OF TORN JEANS**