

A Radioactive Wit *** Exhibit celebrates work of Baton Rouge artist Caroline Durieux

Advocate, The (Baton Rouge, LA) - August 29, 2010

Author: ROBIN MILLER

Oh, Caroline Durieux could be crotchety, all right, and she didn't mince words if she didn't like you.

And she didn't like Camille Bercier's husband, Mark.

Bercier had lost track of the time one night while visiting with the artist. Durieux lived in a small house on West Chimes Street, just off the LSU campus. There was a time when the house stood alone in its small lot.

There also was a time when it stood in the middle of a drug hub.

But LSU has managed to grow around it, and Bercier has since bought the house where her husband came looking for her that night.

That was the same night Durieux told him to go away.

"She said, 'You just need to go on and leave her alone,'" Bercier said, laughing. "She told him, 'All you're going to do is get her pregnant, and then she'll never be an artist.'"

Bercier has to stop talking now. Laughter has overcome her.

Durieux was right. The Berciers did have a child, a girl that Camille Bercier named for Durieux.

But Durieux also was wrong. Bercier did become an artist and eventually started her own book binding and restoration business.

And she founded that business inside the house she used to visit.

Bercier was required to bring samples of her work on each visit to Durieux's home. Durieux expected her to continuously create.

Why?

Because Durieux expected no less of herself. She created well into the latter years of her life, her work finally coming to a halt after a series of strokes.

And some 90 pieces of that work are showing through Nov. 7 in the exhibit Caroline Durieux: A Radioactive Wit. The show is a retrospective look at Durieux's career with work spanning from the 1930s to the 1980s.

"We named it A Radioactive Wit, because she developed the radioactive electron print in the 1950s," Natalie Mault said. "She received a grant to do this while she was teaching at LSU. She had a student assistant named Natalie Wheeler whose husband, Harry Wheeler, was an LSU professor of botany."

Harry Wheeler was using radioactive ink to document algae. Durieux immediately was intrigued.

Why couldn't the method be used in printmaking?

Mault stands beside one of the cases housing one of the radioactive drawings. And make no mistake, these are radioactive, a thought that didn't really hit home with Mault until she started the hands-on process of curating this show.

"The pieces that are radioactive have the radiation mark on them," she said, pointing through the glass at one piece bearing the mark. "I panicked when I realized this, because I was handling them. But then I learned that, yes, this is enough radiation to affect your health but only if you eat it. And we're not going to be eating Caroline Durieux's artwork."

Mault is the museum's curator, and putting this show together has been a true privilege, because it's been in the works since the LSU Museum of Art made its move from the university's Memorial Tower to the Shaw Center for the Arts in 2005.

"The museum has always talked about this show," Mault said. "And now it's happening."

Yes, it's happening, radiation and all.

The radioactive ink prints are found near the end of the exhibit, which begins with some of the few paintings Durieux created in her career, including the museum's signature Durieux piece, "Café Tupinamba," showing caricatures of four men in white suits and Panama

hats sitting around a table.

Durieux was known more for her drawings and prints than her paintings, but even her paintings show her sharp wit.

Bercier was one of the people Mault consulted when putting this exhibit together. She also talked to Georgia artist Malaika Favorite. Both were students in the LSU School of Art. Favorite was a freshman the year Durieux retired. Durieux was already retired by the time Bercier entered the school's master of fine arts program.

LSU hired Durieux as an instructor of painting in 1943. She was a professor at the time of her retirement in 1964.

She received her bachelor of design degree from Newcomb College in 1916, studying under William and Ellsworth Woodworth.

She also earned a bachelor of art degree in education from Newcomb in 1917.

Durieux then left for the Pennsylvania Academy of Design, where she studied from 1918 to 1920. She received her master's degree from LSU in 1949.

Durieux was a pioneer, she was innovative. She made things happen - she knew she had to make them happen. Opportunities didn't come easily to women in her time, and Durieux knew from the time she was a child she wanted to be an artist.

But girls were supposed to get married, have children. And Durieux did eventually marry childhood friend Pierre Durieux after returning to New Orleans from Pennsylvania. New Orleans was her hometown; she was born in 1896 and grew up in a French-speaking family on Esplanade Avenue. Durieux's husband, Pierre, was an export businessman working for General Motors.

Mault later will point out some of Durieux's prints from this era, ones depicting General Motors executives' wives in hoity-toity environments. Durieux could see humor in the world they created for themselves, something that came naturally to her, having spent her childhood drawing caricatures of aunts, uncles and cousins.

Pierre Durieux moved first to Cuba, then Mexico. Pierre Durieux had business in both countries, and it was in Mexico that Durieux cemented her satirical style in paintings and lithographs, depicting both upper class Mexicans and American businessmen in her work.

She and Pierre Durieux lived there from 1926 to 1936. Her work attracted the attention of Mexican modernist Diego Rivera. Rivera painted her portrait - the same portrait that greets visitors into the LSU Museum of Art's exhibition. He also publicly praised her work.

Durieux reminisced about her friendship with Rivera in conversations with Bercier. And the two truly were friends, not mere acquaintances. He believed in her.

"She wasn't the kind of lady who sat around - she liked to do things," Bercier said. "When she finally moved into her little house, she had parties. Big parties."

Bercier laughs.

"She was known for her parties," she said.

Durieux also was known for her lithographs depicting New Orleans.

A collection, known as the Mardi Gras series, eventually were published in a book. Some prints from that series are included in the museum's show.

"We're exhibiting only a few of those, because we showed the whole series a year and a-half ago," Mault said.

Back to Durieux's timeline, her works were featured in one-woman art shows upon her return to the United States. She became involved in the Vieux Carre Art Colony centered in the Arts and Crafts Club, and in 1938, she assumed directorship of the WPA Federal Art Project in New Orleans.

She also was teaching at Newcomb at the time, and left there for LSU in 1943.

"She never talked about her husband, and I never asked her," Bercier said. "He'd committed suicide, and I know that was very hard for her."

An obituary in The Advocate published on Nov. 27, 1989, said, "It took Durieux a long time to recover from her husband's suicide. His death, she said, rocked her. 'I worked hard,' she said. 'My students helped me. I got over it. You know people are a lot tougher than they're given credit for.'"

And if one word could describe Durieux, tough may just be it. Because she didn't let anything hold her back from what she wanted to do.

Art was important to her - not only her own but her students' as well. She was professor and mentor to several stars in Louisiana's art world, including George Dureau, Robert Gordy and Elemore Morgan Jr.

Morgan died in 2008. He was known for his colorful, impressionistic Louisiana landscapes. He also was Bercier's professor at what was then the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette.

"I'd just received my bachelor's degree from USL, and I was going to LSU for my master's," Bercier said. "I wanted to meet Caroline Durieux. I was in awe of her. So, Elemore wrote me a letter of introduction, saying I was going to come by and meet her. That was how it was done in those days - you didn't just go knocking on someone's door."

Bercier didn't muster up enough nerve to knock on Durieux's door until three months after her arrival at LSU, and the small lady unnerved her even then. Durieux wasn't as interested in talking about her own art as she was Bercier's.

"She asked me, 'Where's your portfolio?'" Bercier said. "I didn't bring it. She said, 'Are you scared of the old bag?' Yes, I was. She told me to bring it the next time, and I did."

And from that point, their friendship was forged. They talked about art. They talked about Durieux's days in Mexico, her circle of friends and even her house.

Durieux was short, and she had her house especially built to accommodate her height.

"She also had her house built to revolve around her studio," Favorite said.

"She had small windows built on the west side, and had the east side glassed in, so she would work in natural light," Favorite said. "She had a small bedroom and a small kitchen, and the studio was the biggest part. Because of that, I built a studio in my home. She taught me that an artist must be surrounded by what they're working on. I knew that I would have to have my studio in my home to keep working as a fulltime artist. That might not work for every artist, but I learned through her that it was what I needed to do."

Durieux gave her printmaking plates to Favorite before she died, and Favorite still uses Durieux's equipment in her work today.

"She saw a vision in me," Favorite said. "She believed in my work, and that meant a lot to me. She was constantly creating, even when she was in the hospital. She knew how to highlight a person's strengths. I remember visiting her, and she pointed out the nurse's legs. She said, 'Look, do you see how strong their legs are? Draw them with strong legs.'"

Sadly, Durieux couldn't draw the nurses with strong legs. She'd suffered five strokes in two weeks' time, therefore losing control of her hands.

"I don't think she thought she was going to live long after that," Bercier said. "She started giving away things. She even gave away her dishes. But she did live for a while after that. Longer than she thought. I think her will was that strong."

After a conversation with Bercier, it's easy to see how the artwork can't be separated from Durieux's life. The paintings, drawings and prints are like milestones, each marking what happened when.

"We've divided the show into sections of her life," Mault said. "We begin with her earlier works and work our way around to what she was doing with the radioactive prints at LSU. She was known as the 'Crazy Art Professor in the Science Department.'"

Wrapping up the exhibition are Durieux's colored cliché verre prints, which essentially are prints made from glass surfaces.

The museum best sums up the show in its publication "Art Talk," when it encourages visitors to "discover the artist whose imagination, careful craftsmanship and fearless experiments captured the imperfection of society for the greater part of the 20th century and led to new innovations in science and art."

But Bercier's story probably best sums up Durieux's everyday attitude, a spirit that always was looking for ways to create and pushing others to do the same.

"I'd learned I was pregnant, and I was afraid to tell her," Bercier said.

Of course, Bercier was thinking back to the time Durieux shooed Bercier's husband Mark away from the door, telling him to leave Bercier alone.

Mark Bercier also is an artist and now is co-owner of Taylor-Bercier Gallery in New Orleans.

Still, Durieux saw him as a nuisance.

"He didn't know what to say to her that night," Bercier said, laughing. "And when I finally told her I was pregnant, she didn't have much to

say, either."

After Bercier gave birth to her daughter Caroline, she paid a visit to Durieux.

"She looked at Caroline - I named my daughter for Caroline Durieux - and said, 'Well, I guess you did OK on this. Now, what are you working on now?'" Bercier said, laughing. "I pulled out my portfolio and showed her, and we talked about art. We were always talking about art."

Caroline Durieux: A Radioactive Wit

WHAT: A retrospective exhibit celebrating artist Caroline Durieux's prolific career.

WHEN: Through Nov. 7. Hours are 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday; 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursday; and 1-5 p.m. Sunday.

WHERE: LSU Museum of Art in the Shaw Center for the Arts, 100 Lafayette St.

ADMISSION: \$8, adults; \$6 seniors age 65 and older and LSU faculty, staff and students with an ID; and \$4, children ages 5-17. Children younger than 5 are admitted free. Admission is \$2 per child for school programs. Group discounts also are available.

INFORMATION: Call (225) 389-7200 or visit <http://www.lsumoa.com>.

Events set to coincide with exhibit

The LSU Museum of Art has scheduled several events to coincide with its exhibit Caroline Durieux: A Radioactive Wit:

- Sunday, Sept. 5, Free First Sunday. Admission is free.
- 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 11, "What's the Difference?" Visitors will play a game in the galleries, identifying differences in colors, shapes, sizes and numbers. Also, children will be given a "Take-and-Make" bag to bring home to create their own artwork inspired by their museum visit. Groups of 10 or more are encouraged to e-mail lgaut@lsu.edu.
- 6:30-8:30 p.m. Thursday Sept. 16, LSU Night. Admission is free. Come celebrate LSU's sesquicentennial with a viewing of the new LSU Past and Present exhibition, Sculptors in Clay, Glass and Metal: Steve Rucker, Paulo Dufour, Stephen Paul Day, and Mary Jane Parker.
- Sunday, Oct. 3. Free First Sunday. Admission is free.
- 3 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 3, Treasures of LSU book signing with editor Laura Lindsay. The LSU Museum of Art will host a book signing, in conjunction with LSU's Sesquicentennial celebration and the release of the Treasures of LSU book. Come see 26 of the official treasures on display at the museum.
- 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 9, Second Saturday: Eye Spy. Free admission. Visitors will play a game where they will identify treasures in the museum. Children will be given a "Take-and-Make" bag to bring home to create their own artwork inspired by that in the museum. Groups of 10 or more are encouraged to e-mail lgaut@lsu.edu.
- 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 31, Durieux Dramatized. Costumed actors from LSU's Department of Theatre will bring alive some of Caroline Durieux's satirical characters in the exhibit Caroline Durieux: A Radioactive Wit through audience suggestions.
- Sunday, Nov. 7, Free First Sunday. Admission is free.
- 3 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 7, A Musical Backdrop. Caroline Durieux's art provides a vision of southern culture from the 1930s and 1940s, and Michael Lasser, the "walking encyclopedia" of American song and host of NPR's "Fascinatin' Rhythm," provides the musical backdrop.
- 1-5 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 7, Last day to see the exhibition Caroline Durieux: A Radioactive Wit.

Caption: B.W. photo: Carolina Durieux's print 'Bipeds Dancing' is among more than 90 of her works featured in the exhibit Caroline Durieux: A Radioactive Wit at the LSU Museum of Art in the Shaw Center for the Arts. Durieux was known for her satirical depictions of American and Mexican bourgeoisie. Color photo: 'Andre' is one of a few oil paintings in the exhibit. Color photo: ABOVE: 'Bright Aquarium' by Caroline Durieux is one of several cliché verre prints in the LSU Museum of Art's exhibit Caroline Duireux: A Radioactive Wit. B.W. photo: LEFT: In her print 'Beauty Salon,' Caroline Durieux commented that the women appeared as if they were wearing helmets in the battle on beauty. B.W. photo: BELOW: In 'Bather,' Durieux again pokes fun at high society, depicting an elite woman sunbathing on a beach in her jewelry. Durieux taught in the LSU School of Art from 1943 to 1964. She died in 1989. B.W. photo: 'King of the Carnival' is part of Caroline Durieux's Mardi Gras series, in which she depicts the characters and traditions of carnival in her hometown of New Orleans. The exhibit runs through Nov. 7. (Images provided by the LSU Museum of Art) 'Caroline Durieux: A Radioactive Wit' performance info box (attached) 'Events set to coincide with exhibit' info box (attached)

