

A whole lotta moose

When artist Gisèle Benoit straps on her antler disguise, the moose of Gaspé Peninsula come calling.

Article by Bramwell Ryan

Although 35 years old, Gisèle Benoit suddenly looks like a child. “What do you mean?” she asks, her head tipped quizzically to one side, her waist-length blond ponytail flopping past her left shoulder. “They’re not ugly, they’re cute.” To this artist and film-maker, moose are beautiful. For 15 years she has had a fascination with the ungainly animal. She’s in love. And as we all know, the reasons we love anyone or anything are usually a mixture of wisdom and folly, certainty and a shrug of the shoulders.

Gisèle and her parents, Monique and Raynald, have nurtured that love by getting as close as possible to moose. Daily, in spring, summer and fall, they load drawing pads and pencils, cameras, tripods and plastic-wrapped sandwiches into a fiberglass canoe and paddle to the chosen site to sit and wait. On this particular summer day, they are waiting on Lac Paul. The tiny lake is a thumb-print squished in among the Chic-Chocs mountains in the centre of the Gaspé Peninsula in eastern Quebec. The thick forest around the lake is home to a large population of wild moose.

Part of Gisèle’s admiration for the animal is rooted in the excitement of knowing secrets – she’s discovered that the rest of the world knows little about the beasts. Most of us only see moose as we zip along remote highways at 100 kilometres per hour. Gisèle says scientists have shown little interest in the moose and much of what is known was gathered by hunters, who usually have something other than research in mind when they’re in the bush.

At close range, despite what Gisèle sees, moose are odd animals. They appear to be cobbled with legs from a giraffe, a body from a cow and a misshapen head that looks as if it was dropped enroute to the assembly table. They’re huge and, although mammals spend a considerable portion of their summer lives standing chest-deep in water, dipping their snouts to the sandy lake bottom where tender shoots sprout. It’s when they wade into the water to feed that Gisèle and her parents can observe them closely.

It’s a hot day, and the bugs have found a banquet of several humans foolish enough to sit for hours, wordless and motionless, in two canoes. The rhythmic spurt of tiny waves smacking the vessels could lull anyone to sleep, but the bugs have other plans. They land and gnaw like a plague until the thought of escaping into the cold, blood sucker-infested water seems reasonable to us.

Fifty metres ahead of the canoes, Gisèle sits on a small foldaway stool on a sliver of land. On her lap is a drawing tablet, and in her right hand, a soft-lead pencil. She’s dressed in the same outfit she wears every day – brown pants, a long-sleeved green

cotton shirt and a big brown peaked cap. It’s her uniform. The video camera is a tough master and requires that she wear the same clothes for continuity. The fast-paced, tightly edited demands of filming insist that films that took years to shoot should look as though they were completed in a day. That illusion of speed is contrasted by Gisèle art. The ancient craft of brushing oil on canvass is a slow, evocative expression of awe. For Gisèle, the work begins on the shores of Lac Paul.

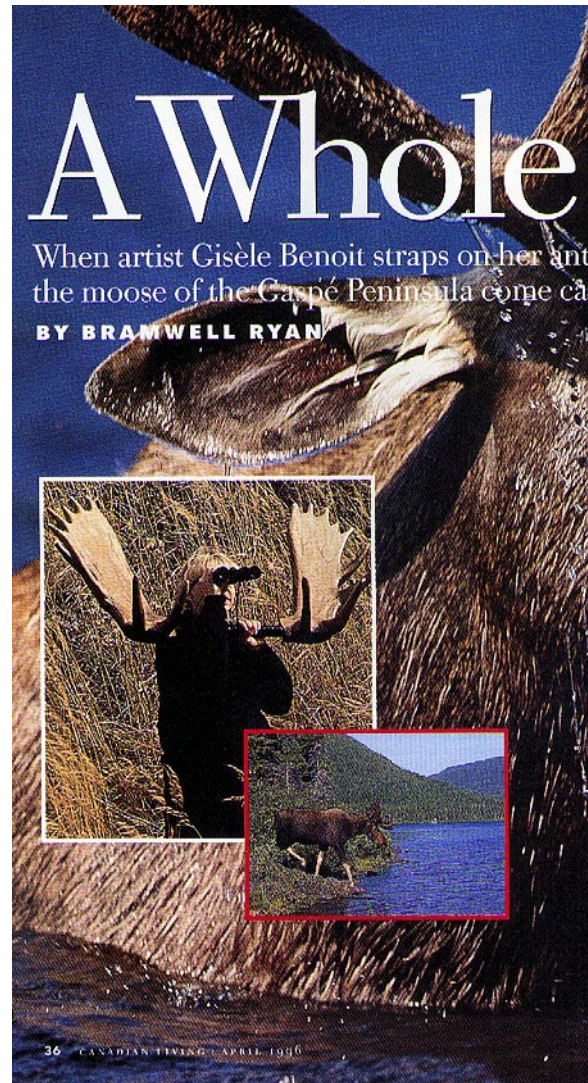
She sits on the stool for hours. Raynald is camped beside the canoe with a tripod-mounted video camera stuck in the soft, smelly mud of the lake, waiting for the arrival of Face Grise, Cocotte or Sarah. The family graces each regular at the watering hole with a name.

While she waits, Gisèle sketches. With the simplest of tools, she captures the essence of what is. Circling the lake are a dozen rounded mountains, their green slopes bleached of intensity by the heat haze, snoozing until the evening’s cooler temperatures. Ducks splash a runway in the water; the wind teases the leaves into a dance, and when it dies, it’s quiet enough to hear the rattle of butterfly wings. “Words are tasteless to describe the beauty here,” she says.

Gisèle is a self-taught artist. When she was young, she spent more time sketching animals than listening to teachers. She was 15 when her first drawings were exhibited. Two years later she won a Canadian Nature Federation bursary of \$1,500, given to encourage outstanding young wildlife artists. She used the money to finance a family trip to Alberta and the Yukon. “It was a very important trip,” says Gisèle in French. “It was the first time I saw so many wild animals. It opened my mind to wildlife, and after the trip, I was sure I’d spend my life painting animals.”

In 1980, the family discovered Gaspésie Provincial Park, where Lac Paul is located. Initially they made the trip from their home in Lavaltrie, just outside Montreal, looking for woodland caribou. Instead they found moose. “They’re very intelligent, very beautiful,” says Gisèle in a voice softened by years of silence. “They’re like a monarch, not cute like Bambi. They have a rough beauty like a horse.” She had found her subject. The family kept returning to the area, eventually buying a second home north of the park. Raynald began shooting a film and his daughter sketched, and later brushed, remarkable portraits.

Her canvass creations sell for \$1,000 to \$15,000



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