



# the art of living

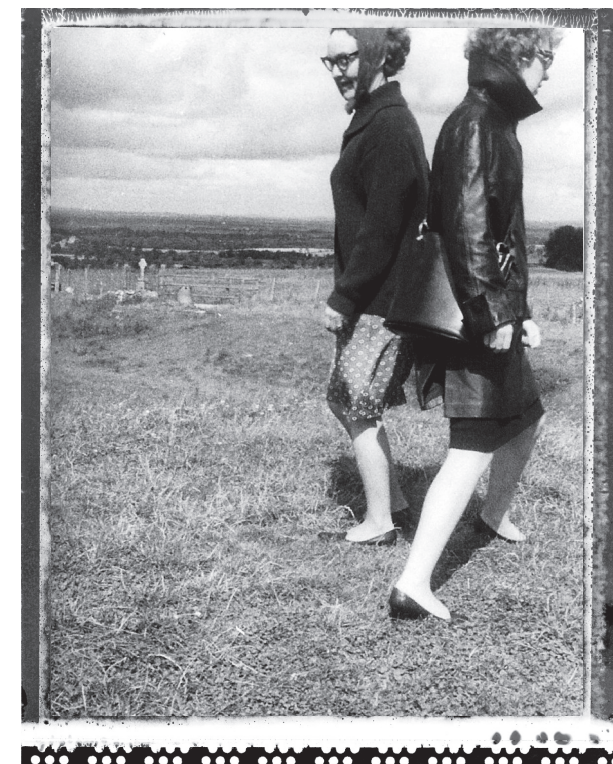
A mother and daughter sculpt their shifting relationship.

By Anne Mayhew

*Some years ago, I found my father's diaries – the writings of a man I'd never really known because he died when I was only three. He wrote from 1931 to 1938, age 14 to 22 – a page a day for seven and a half years. He and my mother had been sweethearts since the beginning (with occasional turbulence all duly noted). I described my experience of finding the journals, reading them and coming to know my father in "If Words Had Wings" in Homemakers (February/March 2008). This is the other wing of the story. It is about my mother, alone, creating a life. And it is about how I came to know her.*

This page: Elza Mayhew surveys her Victoria studio in 1971. Opposite page: Elza and Anne Mayhew saw their relationship come full circle.

PHOTOGRAPHY: KEN MCALLISTER (LEFT); FERNAU HALL (RIGHT)



*"God but I love Elza.... She's worth anything and everything."  
– Alan Mayhew*

When my artist mother, Elza Mayhew, was 27 years old, the seaplane her young husband, Alan Mayhew, was piloting went down in a hurricane in the Indian Ocean. It was World War II, June 11, 1943.

She was left with two young children: myself, close to four, and my brother, Garth Alan, just one year old. Who was she, the secretive Bette Davis look-alike with the high forehead and green eyes? The young woman who was left to wing it alone?

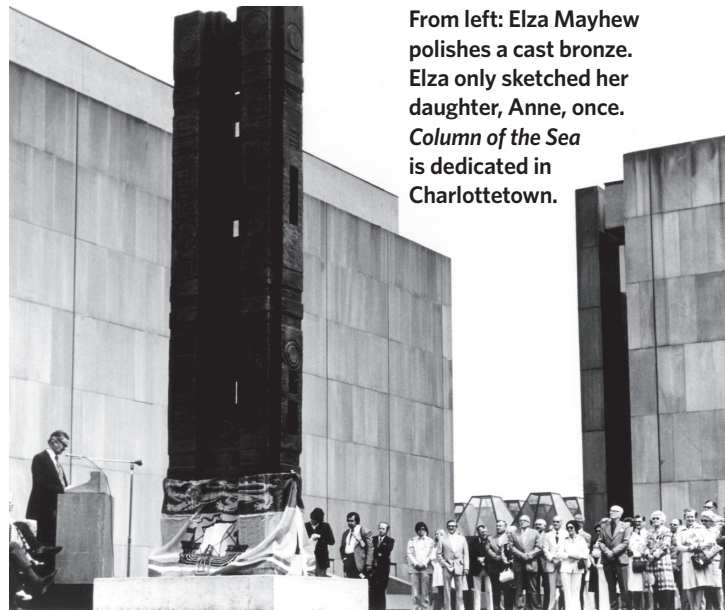
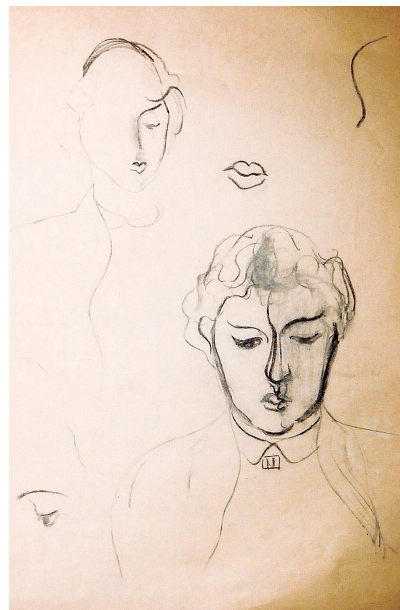
Of course, in those early years, my widowed mother wasn't completely alone. She

was supported by two loving pairs of parents: her own and my father's, her in-laws. And I – fatherless – felt secure in their care. Years later, I came to realize that they had held the four corners of my flying carpet, keeping me aloft, supported and cared about.

I was lucky. My mother had grief to deal with. I simply had loss, which wasn't a recognizable entity to me then. Emptiness was filled by my grandparents. But my mother's loss could not be filled. She said she cried for a year. And then she told herself to stop.

I was stopped too – first from fighting with my brother: "One more quarrel and it's to boarding school." I went to >





From left: Elza Mayhew polishes a cast bronze. Elza only sketched her daughter, Anne, once. *Column of the Sea* is dedicated in Charlottetown.

boarding school. No display of anger was allowed after that, and precious few tears.

Eventually my mother found a way to break through this need to deny feelings in the physical act of carving, creating a form from a block of foam to hold the cast metal. She almost never stopped to plan. Her grief became funnelled into such an intense creativity that it sprang into mature work, an alchemy of molten bronze.

She was inspired by many things: her love of languages, Japanese flower arranging, a paper she once wrote about Roman tombstones. Many of the tombstones had lacunae – blanks in the inscriptions, letters worn away that had to be guessed at, pieces missing.

I knew about blanks. No father for me; no father for my brother. No anger or tears. Something lacking. Lacunae.

Missing.

Of all of the hundreds of pages of my mother's drawings, I found only one with sketches of me: It had one sketch with half a face drawn in and another with two halves, a dark and a light.

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*"I have never made a sculpture that is not closely related to the human being...people, buildings, entrances through which people go in, come out." – Elza Mayhew*

I never totally met with my mother's approval. Though she was proud of some of my achievements, she remained skeptical of my emotions. However, there was a time when things shifted. I rather fell into it. I began to know my mother in terms of what she was doing as a sculptor, and she came to value what

I could do to assist. It wasn't a very maternal arrangement, but it was always interesting. And it was the way I finally found to bond with her.

Elza was happier travelling with a "friend" than with a daughter, which would have dated her. So, as we both looked very young, that's what we did. I called her Elza. It didn't bother me. Vanity was not normally her card.

We crisscrossed Europe, went to Turkey and visited Yucatán, Mexico, to look at sculptures. In 1964 she represented Canada at the prestigious international art show the Venice Biennale. We spent several weeks in Venice, and went up and down the canals on gondolas trying to find blowtorches and steel wool. Her sculptures had made their way through the Panama Canal, across the Atlantic and up the Mediter-

ranean Sea in wooden crates, so they needed touching up.

My mother said to me, "You're the writer. You name these sculptures. That's your job." I wrote: *Guardian, Supplicant, Iphigenia, Procession, Dynast, Black Priestess*. And the mother and daughter: *Demeter and Persephone*.

In 1972 Elza was commissioned to create a sculpture for the 100th anniversary of Prince Edward Island. Cast in 30 pieces, bolted together and shipped east, the *Column of the Sea* safely reached the new shores. Bronze, 16 feet in height and almost three tons, it was thought to be the largest commissioned cast sculpture in Canada.

Coincidentally, my father and mother last saw each other in Charlottetown in 1942. It was my father's last stop before flying overseas. Family was not allowed, but

my mother went anyway, with three-year-old me in tow. This is where we said goodbye.

And now her sculpture looks out from that Atlantic island, perhaps over the seas to a spot on the Indian Ocean.

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*"Art is not a thing of the moment. It must express something of the feeling of the span of life from birth to death.... It's totemic; it's a generational thing." – Elza Mayhew*

Toward the end of the '70s I came home to Victoria after years in Montreal and Toronto. I wanted my two children to feel at home in the mosses and lichens of the West Coast forests.

It was fortunate timing, because something else was happening. Unknown to us, Elza was in the very beginnings of experiencing damage to her brain from toxins in the foam moulds used for her sculptures, a method of casting that she had pioneered.

"Anne," she said, "I think something is wrong with my brain. If I knew for sure, I would walk into the ocean and drown myself." I couldn't tell her what I suspected.

Full damage wasn't evident for several years. It was a dementia that first affected her spatial orientation of all things – ironic for a sculptor.

Gradually, all was affected. During the process, I became the guardian of her work – like the sculpture I had named so many years before. With the help of my children, I catalogued paintings, draw-

ings and sculptures. I completed casts in series that she hadn't finished. I learned to use her polishing machines.

"Anne will take care of everything," she told a friend. Anne did.

This was our continuum. I'd known my mother as a lively 14-year-old through my father's diaries, then felt her sorrow and discipline as she was a young widow, telling me not to cry. I'd known her as a friend and travel companion, and finally as a sculptor who entrusted her work to me.

Then, around 1990, the styrene's effects began their rampage and down she grew as up I went. Elza became 28, then 14. Finally, when I was 60, she was about four. My mother became a child before my eyes. The process had covered some 14 years.

Once, when I was taking her to the bank, Elza pulled me over to her favourite teller. "I want you to meet my mother," she proudly said to the young woman. We blinked at each other and then smiled. At least it was all in the family. A generational thing. **hm**

*Elza Mayhew died on Jan. 11, 2004, in Victoria. Over the course of some 30 years of sculpting (circa 1955 to 1985), she had become a well-known Canadian artist. When she died, Victoria's Times Colonist newspaper called her "the closest thing to Emily Carr we ever had."*

PHOTOGRAPHY, KEN MCALLISTER (LEFT)