

in the galleries



MJ Edwards' 'Memory,' part of her exhibition 'Memory, Moment, Meaning' is opening Thursday at Grand Manan Island Art Gallery.

Committed to memory

M.J. Edwards pieces together meaning from the past. Story by Shannon Webb-Campbell

If life is made up of a series of moments, it's memory that instills meaning. Grand Manan-based artist M.J. Edwards explores the relationship between memory, moment and meaning in her solo exhibition at the Grand Manan Island Art Gallery from Thursday to Sept. 11.

"I realized every piece dealt either directly or indirectly with memory, meaning, making or the distilled, essential moment captured by the camera," Edwards, director and curator of Grand Manan Museum, says. "The memories it invokes and the meaning that is derived from it – they are really inseparable. They are also fluid and forever changing. As we change, so may the meaning of the work of art for us."

A graduate of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University, Edwards recently took over the role of director and curator for the Grand Manan Museum this past May. *Memory, Moment, Meaning* is a solo exhibition featuring an array of expression: 32 mixed media beeswax encaustic paintings; 20 large format table-top, shrine-like still life arrangements of personal collections; eight black and white surreal digital montage photographs fusing narrative with ancestor figures; and 20 abstract macro photographs of the natural world.

"One body of work in this exhibit, the large-format tabletop still-lives, deals specifically with how meaning is created by association and looks at the role played by memory and how collections are ordered, creating new meaning."

Inspired by the immediacy of photography, Edwards was first drawn to macro photography due to its pure, distilled emotion. It transported her to a quiet, still place.

"The fern before my lens would be transformed into something else, newly created by me – an expression of an emotional state."

As an avid reader, Edwards dreamed of becoming a writer. Her childhood home was filled with cameras – her parents, brother and grandfather were always taking pictures of birds, flowers and people. Her grandfather Raymond E. Ives an award-winning photographer, was the first president of Color Photograph Association of Canada in 1951.



MJ Edwards' 'Full Moon Rising.'

"In making art, I can combine ideas that are more intellectual or verbal with playfulness, abstraction or elements of design," she says. "I like the immediacy of the visual. I like having a product at the end of the creating process – the physicality of an encaustic work that can be built up or gouged back, collaged or polished as smooth as glass. It also smells good hanging on the wall."

Her camera's ability to stop time, documenting a fleeting moment, is a tool of manipulation and memory. She understands the power and possible projections at play.

"Memory is how we make sense of the past, live in the present and go forward into the future with a sense of continuity," she says. "Without memory I don't think there can be any sense of self."

"To capture a moment is to isolate it from the flow of many. I believe such moments help us see and feel more deeply. Moments captured with a camera also aid memory and memories enrich our lives."

Edwards created small shrines and memories to times past and dead relatives she never met from snippets of memory passed down from her mother. Edwards is fascinated by what was, what could have been, what is. There's a strong awareness of the artist's interpretative role and relationship to the work, yet leaves room for the viewer's personal interpretation.

"I have a series of large-format pieces in this exhibit, which are tabletop compositions of objects and photographs. I create shrines, memorials or grids in these photographs to explore how meaning can be manipulated and controlled through different groupings of objects."□

Shannon Webb-Campbell is an award-winning writer, photographer and journalist. Her work can be found throughout Canada. She hangs her hat in Halifax and can be reached at twitter.com/shannonwc.

'Memory, Moment, Meaning' is on display from Thursday until Sept. 10 at the Grand Manan Island Art Gallery, 21 Cedar St., Castalia. There is an opening reception Saturday, Aug. 27, from 7-9 p.m., as well as a closing reception Sept. 10 from 6-7 p.m.