

Health and (un)Safety

Alana Leprich talks to Shelley Leach about her troubling experiences, and the dangers posed to artists by their materials.

The following is an account from a practicing artist and CARFAC member, written in plain font, interspersed with the facts behind her experiences, written in italics. Read her story as a warning, and take from the facts measures to protect yourself in your practice.

Shelley Leach felt ill. Her vision would not focus, her balance would not stabilize, and her body felt weak. With all of the symptoms of a serious condition, she was concerned. In this state, and with limited mobility, she increasingly devoted herself to her profession and passion: her artistic practice. Unbeknownst to her, it was the painting itself that was making her ill. This created a dangerous cycle – the sicker she felt, the more she painted; the more she painted, the sicker she became.

The modern workplace is generally perceived as uncompromising. Years of trial and tribulation have shaped our professional society to be a safer one, with virtually all workplaces establishing health and safety standards, training and practices. Everything, down to what may seem the smallest of concerns, is accounted for. (During a stint in retail, I was once obliged to complete a six page report and a thirty minute interview after receiving a small and painless papercut – overkill much?)

We are lulled into believing that we are safe, placing trust in the practices established to ensure our safety. Artists' studios can be a grey area, however – artists are at particular risk of developing health problems associated with exposure to chemicals for several reasons, including little or no training in the hazards of the chemicals and materials they possess. Many turn to the warning documentation supplied with a product to ensure their safety; sometimes, the accuracy of these labels can be problematic.

As these symptoms worsened, she visited her doctor and was tested for the usual suspect illnesses – all tests reported that she was fine. But her health continued to decline. Given that no apparent disease was found, doctors began to suspect an environmental cause. Questioning whether an allergen could be the culprit, Leach sealed up her windows to avoid contact with the outdoors. This only worsened her situation, as it further limited the ventilation she unknowingly required.

The chemical Leach was using was a Stoddard solvent, containing ingredients of Distillates (petroleum), Hydrotreated Light 64742-47-8. Per its material safety data sheet (MSDS), it is extremely dangerous. Inhalation is particularly hazardous, as “breathing high concentrations of vapor may cause respiratory irritation, euphoria, excitation or giddiness, headache, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, loss of appetite, fatigue, muscular weakness, staggering gait”. Higher exposure causes central nervous system (CNS) depression, symptoms of which include “dizziness, drowsiness, disorientation, vertigo, memory loss, visual disturbances, difficulty with breathing, convulsions, unconsciousness, paralysis, coma, and even death”. In larger concentrations, the chemical’s vapor can be fatal in a matter of minutes.

This chemical’s MSDS strongly emphasizes the necessity to use the product in a well ventilated space, and for limited amounts of time. Unfortunately, the product which Leach purchased had no warning label on the bottle, and the store possessed no MSDS for the product. Both are violations of the Canada Consumer Product Safety Act (S.C. 2010, c. 21) as previously discussed, and both resulted in Leach suffering health complications.

After ruling out all other factors, Leach’s doctor questioned whether her condition could be linked to her painting products. Leach was skeptical, as the products she used were, to her knowledge, non-toxic. But eager to determine the cause of her affliction, she discontinued the use of her paint thinner, an odorless solvent she purchased which possessed no warning label. To her amazement, her symptoms improved, then started to disappear.

In Canada, there are several measures in place to ensure consumer safety. The Canada Consumer Product Safety Act (CCPSA) is the major policy in place by our federal department of health, Health Canada. Reviewed and revised one year ago, the act mandates to better protect the health and safety of Canadians. It achieves this by enforcing certain provisions, such as requiring industry to report any serious injury or death by product to the government, and making it an offense to package or label products with false claims. These provisions, coupled with strict penalties for those who break them, have



Forbidden by Shelley Leach, original size 24 x 36. Painted during her illness.

created a system where all products on the market have been tested, certified, labeled, and any potential hazards noted. However, mistakes are inevitable, and problem products occasionally slip through the cracks – in these cases, there is little that provisions, fines or penalties can do to help the harmed consumer.

Since eliminating the solvent from her environment, Leach's physical symptoms largely resolved. What remains, however, is her emotional distress at the severity of the situation, and the nonchalant way it was handled by all parties involved. Since bringing the incorrect labeling to the attention of the manufacturer and Health Canada, the product is now correctly labeled. Still, Leach has received little compassion and zero compensation for her suffering. She hopes that her experiences will serve as a cautionary tale to fellow artists, to take full responsibility in protecting themselves from their artistic materials.

Shelley Leach is an established practicing artist based in Ontario. Examples of her landscape-focused work, and other information, can be found on her website at <http://shelleyleach.com>.

The policies set in place by our federal government aim to protect consumers, but as described, your only surefire protection is yourself. Here are several actions you can take to protect yourself:

- **Know the relative hazards of your materials**
- **Use water-based materials where possible**
- **Avoid powders and dusts**
- **When possible, substitute hazardous materials with safe or less-toxic alternatives**
- **Be patient as you learn how to use safer substitutes**
- **Enclose unsafe substances**
- **Work in a well-ventilated area. When this is not possible, wear appropriate protective equipment, such as a respirator, goggles or gloves**
- **If unsure of a chemical's properties, ask your art supplier for further information, or a reference to the product manufacturer. If unsatisfied, always contact CARFAC Ontario for a reference to an appropriate resource**