

Sean Karemaker's Narrative Art

A graphic novelist's drawings about his mother's life in a Danish orphanage recreate a grim experience with love and compassion.

by Beverly Cramp

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Sean Karemaker, "Esbjerg Orphanage," 2018, ink on paper, 1.5' x 6'

As a young boy, Sean Karemaker dreamed of recreating his mother's stories about living in a Danish orphanage.

A budding artist, he built his skills, earned a diploma in graphic design and went on to work as a 3-D designer for video games, as well as an illustrator and graphic designer. Eventually, he wrote a graphic novel, *The Ghosts We Know*, about his childhood.

Only then did Karemaker feel ready to start work on his mother's story. He began experimenting with different techniques and discovered that he liked stringing together six-page sequences of his rough drawings.

He projected these sequences, or scrolls, onto large sheets of Bristol paper and then redrew everything. He also wrote text for the pictures, reworking it, he says, to be as emotionally honest as he could.

After 18 months, he had completed a graphic novel that tells how his mother selflessly raised her brothers from the age of seven after her father left her mother, who had paranoid schizophrenia.

The book's title, *Feast of Fields*, is a reference to the picnics Karemaker shared with his mother in the fields of his elementary school. It was released in 2018 by Conundrum Press, a small

publisher of graphic novels in Wolfville, N.S., and was listed as one of the top 16 comics of the year by CBC Books.

Karmaker's original drawings are now displayed at the Seymour Art Gallery in North Vancouver as *Candy Bar, Electric Lights: The Scroll Stories of Sean Karmaker*. On view until Feb. 23, they demonstrate how he uses magic realism to explore memories and family history.



Sean Karmaker, "Candy Bar," 2018, ink on paper, 1.5' x 6'

Fourteen of his six-foot-long black-and-white drawings wind along the gallery's walls, one scroll flowing into the next. Visitors can walk the perimeter, examining a detailed, but wordless, visual story.

To see the text, they must look at the book, which is available in the gallery. And for one day, on Feb. 16, there's a third way to experience *Feast of Fields* – immersed in a virtual reality environment that Karmaker created with 3-D artist Charles Barnard.

Karmaker started exhibiting in galleries in 2012. His show at the Seymour Art Gallery is just one of several recent Vancouver exhibitions about comics, graphic novels and animation art.

Last fall, a show at the Interurban Gallery, *Onward!*, featured comics, posters and paintings by Vancouver's David Lester. And, in 2013, the Vancouver Art Gallery hosted a retrospective of New York comic artist Art Spiegelman that included more than 400 drawings, sketches, studies and panels. ■

Candy Bar, Electric Lights: The Scroll Stories of Sean Karmaker is on view at the Seymour Art Gallery in North Vancouver from Jan. 12 to Feb. 23, 2019.

Seymour Art Gallery

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