

# Herstory restored: Photographer Carol Sawyer presents the imagined life of Natalie Brettschneider

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Published Jun 30, 2023 • Last updated Jun 30, 2023 • 4 minute read



Artist Carol Sawyer poses at Contemporary Calgary on Wednesday, June 28, 2023. Jim Wells/Postmedia  
Jim Wells/Postmedia

In the coffee-table book based on the exhibit *Carol Sawyer: The Natalie Brettschneider Archive*, there is a timeline that traces the pivotal moments of Brettschneider's globe-trotting life. It starts with her 1896 birth in New Westminster and ends with her 1986 death in Vancouver.

In between, Brettschneider toured in small operatic companies throughout British Columbia starting in 1913. By the 1920s, she was performing in Paris and Munich. She returned to Vancouver in the 1930s, turned to jazz singing in Ottawa in Toronto in the

1940s and had a residency in Banff in the summer of 1951. But no matter how detailed this chronicle may be, it's far from a thorough account of Brettschneider's wild life. Because, unlike the timelines of real people, her life story continues to evolve. There always seems to be a newly unearthed milestone to record, usually directly related to whatever city Vancouver-based photographer, visual artist and singer Carol Sawyer is showing her work. In fact, since creating her alter-ego in the late 1990s, keeping track of Brettschneider's exploits and relationships with other artists — some real, some imagined — has become increasingly challenging.

“It's getting very baroque,” says Sawyer, in an interview with Postmedia earlier this week before the opening of her exhibit at Contemporary Calgary. “Spreadsheets are involved. I have to seriously go to my website and say, ‘When did I say this was?’ ”

The exhibition, which will be at Contemporary Calgary until Oct. 29, is a multi-disciplinary and ever-growing collection of staged photographs with Sawyer playing Brettschneider, real archival photos, film and other artifacts from a fictional life. It may be imagined, but the story overlaps with some real and often overlooked artists. That includes Calgary-born actress Irene Prothro, a teacher at the University of Alberta and UBC, artistic director at the Calgary Arts Centre Theatre and drama advisor to the University of Calgary with a long history with the Banff Centre; and playwright Lakshimo Rao, who also taught at the centre during the same period. It is posited that Brettschneider befriended both during her stay in Banff in the summer of 1951. Real photos of Prothro and Rao sit alongside those Sawyer created for the period when she had her own residency at the Banff Centre in 2012, including a shot of Brettschneider leading a noisy, 11-piece music ensemble.

A classically trained singer, Sawyer had been wanting to incorporate music into her practice ever since she began in the 1980s but was initially discouraged by gatekeepers who saw mixing disciplines as a distasteful exercise.

“In the late-'70s, 1980s, it was like, ‘That's being dilettante,’ ” says Sawyer. “I'm like, ‘I'm not a dilettante! I'm really serious.’ ”

By the late 1990s, Sawyer had been teaching courses on the history of photography and researching women artists involved in avant-garde art, including German inter-disciplinary Dadaist pioneer Emmy Hemmings and French photographer Claude Cahun.

“I was intrigued with how photographs were used as proof that something happened or the relation between the authorship of the person in the photograph and the person

taking the photograph and how art histories are narratives that have agendas,” she says. “They are written by people, they are suggestive, and they are often used to exclude people ... historically written by men who are enthusiastic about other men and didn’t take seriously what the women were doing.”



Artist Carol Sawyer poses in her exhibition at Contemporary Calgary on June 28, 2023. Jim Wells/Postmedia Jim Wells/Postmedia

The Natalie Brettschneider Archive was born, chronicling the fictional singer’s history and growing community of like-minded, if often overlooked, artists. The project is meant to be “intervention into that art-historical convention,” she says.

“It’s always evolving because art history is always evolving,” Sawyer says. “It’s gone from me taking a few photographs I didn’t think anybody would find interesting to people asking me, ‘Do you think she ever came to Kelowna?’ I’d be like ‘um ... maybe.’ We’d make some pieces that involve that history.”

True to form, some previously unknown Calgary-based biographical tidbits seem to have been unearthed just in time for the Calgary show. There is a photograph, presumably on display for the first time, of Natalie Brettschneider posing flamboyantly in front of the Centennial Planetarium, now the home of Contemporary Calgary. It’s suggested she may have even performed at the 1967 opening of the facility.

The exhibit will also include artwork from female artists, mostly from Calgary, who were active during the same period as Brettschneider. Organizing this part of the exhibit, which includes pieces on loan from private collectors and galleries, has allowed Contemporary Calgary curators to introduce some visual artists who have historically been under-recognized. That includes a piece by Mary Kerr, who may be best known as the wife of renowned painter and educator Illingworth Kerr, but was also an impressive painter in her own right. There is also a linocut print by Helen Stadelbauer, a modernist pioneer who established the University of Calgary art department and spent more than 30 years teaching at the facility. Both figures should be better recognized for their contributions as artists, says senior curator Ryan Doherty.

“Carol’s project is about surfacing these voices in arts that are often silenced,” he says. “There’s a bunch of instances here of women artists who were doing amazing things that we don’t know about.”

Sawyer continues to perform music as Brettschneider and even released a jazz album under the name. At the opening of her exhibit Thursday night, she was scheduled to perform with local musicians Chris Dadge, Nate Waters and Mark Limacher.

Now that she has inhabited the role for more than 20 years, Sawyer admits there is significant personality overlap between her and her creation. But she says the exhibition is designed so gallery-goers can “bring their own stories to it.”

“It should be an invitation to come with me to this make-believe universe, where everybody is an artist and wears fabulous hats,” she says.

*Carol Sawyer: The Natalie Brettschneider Archive is on display at Contemporary Calgary until Oct. 29.*