biographies:

Gwen Armstrong studies and practices art in Winnipeg with the loving support of her three teen daughters. In her previous profession as nurse therapist, she was honored and humbled to be witness to the innermost lives of people facing grave challenges. She believes in art that makes the world be better, not just look better.

Aurora Landin received a Diploma of Art and Design at Red Deer College, a B.F.A. from the University of Calgary, and an M.F.A. from Washington State University. After the “Calgary Hat-Trick” of working for Stride, Truck and The New Gallery, Landin bundled up her NAFTA heritage and headed for the snowbanks of Winnipeg in 1995, where, until recently, she taught print making, drawing and painting at the University of Manitoba. She returns to Calgary this fall to teach at the Alberta College of Art and Design.
I first saw Recidivism, presented in Winnipeg at the Manitoba Printmakers Association. For me, it is a sumptuous celebration of aesthetic delight. The work resonates with thoughtful expression and evocation, and perhaps just a touch of tongue-in-cheek. Landin quirkily juxtaposes neon Las Vegas sights with poignant figurative images of posed piñatas. Though printmaking affords the artist the opportunity to create a series of near-identical pieces, Landin has highlighted the individual by making each image unique. Transitions between the sets of imagery are imperative — a sprinkling of garishly lit Vegas street scenes coyly direct the viewer from Piñatas to Deadly Sins. And I can't help but attribute humanity to Landin’s piñatas. The lone figure in each panel has open arms, ranging from the volitional, welcoming and celebratory to the tragic, humiliated and even crucifixion-like. In making the mental transition from object to human, a concurrent temporal transition occurs.

The piñata, evocative of party and pleasure, becomes also a relic of Mexican religious and cultural tradition, a foreboding of colonization. Franciscan missionaries introduced the piñata to Mexico in an attempt to convert the polytheistic ideology of native Mexicans. The star-shaped piñata, with seven cones representing the deadly sins, represents temptation descending to tantalize humans. Family and friends surround the blindfolded participant (vision symbolically obscured by sin), who must strike to break the body of evil. The reward is a showering of gifts for all.

Piñatas consists of eighteen 10” X 10” panels with acrylic ink silkscreened on aluminum. Each square contains the image of a single piñata and its reflected shadow. The colours, each panel unique, are extraordinary in their acidic exuberance. The panels are printed in a controlled palette of citric pinks and oranges, offset by turquoise greens and chartreuse yellows, with a touch of mauve for balance. Each piñata appears star-shaped, with streamer-strung cones extruding from a circular body. Landin has gone back into the prints minimally, etching a small section in a number of the panels, giving just a peek of the aluminum at its shiniest. The silvery aura awarded each piñata by the choice of metal ground contributes a sense of magic. The celebration is luxuriant, rich, young and alive. But the partying piñata, resplendent and celebratory, has at its heart something just a bit tawdry. Landin has captured the moment in which the piñata, party animal extraordinaire, is about to become prey.

In Of Piñatas and Deadly Sins (21 panels of 21” X 21”), the congruence of the relationship between each panel and the whole piece, and between each piece and the whole exhibit, is particularly striking. The black and silver panels, relieved only by a small real green area on about half of the panels, provide a murky emotional atmosphere. The black ink piñatas pass appear identical in shape to the hedonistic coloured pieces, but their restraint of colour, lucious tonal variation and subtly diverse background treatments lend the “sin” piñatas their deeper, darker psyche. The background (burnished, buffed and discreetly toned with graphite) sweeps around the figure with great activity. The solitary piñata figure, though captured in a moment of perfect stillness, bears such animated energy that its environment continues to reflect its motion. Landin’s decision to brightly colour a small area on some of the piñatas allows the whole piece to replicate the swirling motion of its individual components. The coloured areas add a foreign, almost clinical aspect — a premonition perhaps of amputation to come. Each panel gives a sense of hovering, of suspended animation. Of Piñatas and Deadly Sins might even suggest the thin side of the wedge of inexorable apocalypse.