

Artist to Collect
Joanne Clarke



written by Debra Usher

Responding to the natural surroundings and feeling the essence of nature drive acrylic painter Joanne Clarke. She focuses on capturing fleeting moments in nature.

"I am a watcher, an observer. I am always aware of nuance, ambiance, the light and atmosphere, vibrating colours," she says.

Nature's beauty has been her one inspiring catalyst through her 30 years of painting and exhibiting professionally. Joanne particularly enjoys recreating the sensual, natural chaos of the garden, transcending the "real," arriving at the underlying spirit of these landscapes.

If she had to describe her style it would be a contemporary weaving of elements from impressionism, expressionism and naturalism. She's compelled to paint by organic forms, colour relationships, the effects of light and atmospheric events.

"My own garden and the grand gardens I have seen in our travels have been inspirational in the planning of my large garden paintings," she notes. Extensive travel, gardens and simply walking and driving in the country have informed her work so she always has her sketching materials or camera handy during her journeys. She likes to spend time in national parks, provincial parks and state parks. In earlier years, she absorbed much inspiration from canoeing and camping in the wilderness. India, Nepal, Italy, Portugal, England and France have all provided collective experiences that assert themselves intuitively in her work.

Expressing and exploring with colour, spirit, motion and form

Remembers A.Y. Jackson

Born in Brantford, Ontario in 1944, Joanne lived in Ontario's King City area for decades, spending a brief period in Calgary. She and her husband Murray moved to Grimsby in the fall of 2009.

Joanne was drawing as a very young child and started art lessons with a grade seven school teacher who had been educated at art college and taught art in the privacy of her home. "Hazel Wallington was a good friend of A.Y. Jackson and I met him at her home when I was about 13 or 14. The brother of Tom Thompson was there as well. Even then as a kid, I knew that I was in a room with history."

She considers herself largely self-taught, even

snippets of ideas, etc. I begin loosely and refine later in a complex dance of push and pull."

Her studio has been a reservoir for inspirational materials and energy. Many items dot her studio landscape, providing plenty of food for thought -- her sketch books from particular places or of themes, photographic files, interesting found objects, wonderful art books and catalogues, little notes to herself, little cut-outs of paper or cloth with colour combinations that sing and snippets of quotations that she has found to be thought-provoking.

Inspiration in the studio

"It is in the retreat of the studio where my

She says the gardens are really "landscape at your feet," intimate views, showing her love of colour and organized chaos. She's drawn to the big vistas, rolling hills, fields, foliage, high horizons, places along Ontario's Bruce Peninsula and Niagara Escarpment.

She brings her personal vision to this familiar subject matter by observing and interpreting in a somewhat naturalistic way. "Process is very important to me, but I'm not burdened by an ideological approach to style," she notes. "I want the landscape to be transported from real to imaginary places where it is the essence and the ambient qualities that are explored, sometimes with surprising result. I want the

develops because at some point the painting itself becomes more important than all initial thoughts. I use fine art brushes, knives, thin transparent layers, thicker opaque passages, mediums -- whatever feels right as the work develops. I love colour, the mixing, and the juxtaposition of colour to create vibrancy, mood or tension."

Most of her ideas brew internally or subconsciously and others come from revisiting her sketch books. Often, a new, simple drawing is made; thoughts jotted down. A few anchoring marks are made directly on the canvas which is primed and has had ground colour applied. From there, she works quite intuitively and loosely,



though she undertook extensive art study in her formative years. Her style, she notes, evolved largely through her own personal development and constant exploration. In her early years, she studied with prominent Canadian artists at Toronto's Art Sake and Ontario College of Art, as well as Seneca College in the Greater Toronto Area.

Expressive colour and the rendering of marks, strokes and texture are paramount to her approach. "Characteristically, I paint the fairly large acrylic canvasses in the studio after consulting an accumulation of references: my drawings, photography, descriptive notes,

creativity materializes. I receive the stimuli in nature but the interpretation, the personal vision, is developed in the solace of my studio."

She has a large well-lit basement area in her home for all the messy prep work and for very organized, protective storage. Upstairs, she and her husband converted a reasonably sized dining room into a wonderful new studio.

"I am somewhat reclusive, and for all my painting years the studio has been the retreat, the place to indulge in imagination and experimentation."

She considers herself a landscape painter.

gardens to be joyful and voluptuous, or serene and contemplative. Ultimately important to me is not the place but a creative legacy of what I have experienced, my feeling of the essence of these places."

Joanne works in acrylic on canvas or board. Husband Murray builds the wooden stretchers and then they both stretch high quality canvas onto these large frames. Joanne then seals and primes the substrate. "I like to paint a ground colour, varying in hue or value and usually complementary to the main colouration of the work. I do what I think is required as the painting

building large masses, using fairly pure colour and avoiding white as long as possible.

Warm feeling in the belly

She stresses it is important to stand back and observe the work frequently with a very critical eye. "I need to get a long way into a painting before I allow myself to fall in love. I think we need this early detachment to avoid the common, the pedestrian, the cliché, the slick, etc. Values, more complex colour mixtures, more detail and gestural (emphasizes the process of making art) brushwork then come into play. It may involve



layers being built up.”

The refining process for her takes place over a period of many days or weeks in which she weaves rhythms, gestures and light values, strengthens some areas, subduing others, maybe even simplifying, all to hone in on the essence she’s striving for.

“It is never easy nor should it be. But, there is nothing like the happiness that is derived from a completed painting that gives the artist a warm feeling in the belly.”

Her landscape paintings depict rural Ontario, eastern Canada and US, the Tuscan hills, alpine areas of southern France and the rolling foothills of Alberta.

As for her floral bouquets, she has deliberately kept them simple, striving for poignancy and the dramatic relationship between flowers and background. “I am fortunate to have a large perennial garden, which provides the bounty and inspiration for the bouquets,” she says.

When not painting you can find both Joanne and Murray in the garden, along with daughter Andrea and grandchildren Laura and James. Their King City garden was featured in Canadian Gardening magazine many years ago.

Joanne is impressed by the paintings of American artists Ben Aronson and Wolf Kahn. Historically, she’s always loved the French painter Pierre Bonnard and Canada’s own David Milne.

For budding artists, Clarke suggests that they know their motivation and the level of commitment they are willing to give, and then research possible teachers. Courses taken at the college or art school level will give better grounding than classes from individual artist teachers. “I think it is important to study with people who teach you to think and analyze like an artist. Also, learn to relax, be free and explore.”

Joanne’s favourite food is scallops dripping in butter, garlic and wine. She typically enjoys a nice white wine, usually a Chardonnay or Pinot Grigio, or sometimes a Merlot.

High on her list of favourite Ontario restaurants is Mr. Perch in Killarney, a simple fish and chip wagon. She believes ambiance affects one’s memory of the food and she recalls with fondness eating roast duck and lamb in a small family inn in the Perigord region of France. The best lobster she’s ever eaten was at Halls Harbour on the Bay of Fundy.

“We chose and waited for the lobster, sat at a picnic table under a plastic tarp in the pouring rain and devoured every morsel after dipping in drawn butter. Of course the rain made it taste better.”

Joanne brings to life those fleeting moments in nature.

Joanne Clarke’s work can be seen at Art of the Matter in Aurora, Ontario. Contact the artist at 289.235.8518 or email joanneclarke@cogeco.ca.

