

Artist to Collect
Laurie De Camillis



written by Laurie De Camillis

Laura De Camillis has always found peace in the sanctuary of her studio. Flooding it with light and the sounds of classical music, she continues to carve out a special space in her surroundings where she can revel in her seclusion.

Whether it be in the attic of a townhouse in Vancouver's Chinatown, or in an abandoned building in the middle of a field at the first lock on the Trent River, or more recently, in an industrial building on the east side of Toronto, her studio continues to be her refuge.

"Even as a child there was a place in my room that was separate from anywhere else," says Laurie. "I would steal away to that corner to draw, to that place where time stood still."

Shortly after graduating from the Vancouver School of Art with honours, Laurie exhibited at the Vancouver Art Gallery, receiving great reviews by the critics. Her painting style was colour field abstracts.

However, she put much of her art up on her walls at home, and found that after some weeks she would change them.

Her own art bored her

"I would lose interest in them... Art should be more engaging as time goes on. It should be complex enough to become part of the family, an artifact you cannot part with. When I realized this, I knew I had to change my path. I no longer accepted teaching contracts from the Emily Carr College of Art or the Federation of Canadian Artists or the Banff School of Fine Arts. Instead, I found myself on the back of a motorcycle headed to Ontario to start over."

There, she changed her paint from acrylic to oil and changed from abstracts to imagery, saying she was looking for substance. Although her background is abstract painting, she says she felt compelled to remain closer to the likeness of the subject.

"I wanted to find its truth, not fracture it into its parts."

After a few years, she found her answer in the place where she had started – landscape art.



"Our lives are spent creating order out of the 100 years or so that we are given, and I felt I had just begun. Some of us make order out of words or music. Others use mathematics. I paint."

She says that often when she sees a landscape, a human pose, or a barn she experiences a glimpse of something beautiful that she wants to translate and communicate to her viewer. Her paintings are individual but respectful of the original image, like the moment itself. She says that the subject carries in it the lifetime it has possessed, its own history. The composition reveals its relationships. The light and texture place it in time.

Waiting for a flutter

When out in nature, she says she is always looking for that glimpse that makes her heart flutter, that makes her see the world differently, like seeing the dark cool wet greens of growth that smell both of decay and nourishment, or seeing a reflection of a tree "that dives deeper than the shallow pool will ever know."

This paradox is what she looks for in other artists' work and she finds it in the masterpieces of Dutch artist Vincent Millem van Gogh [1853 – 1890], Italian artist Giorgio Morandi [1890 – 1964], Canadian artist David Milne [1882 – 1953], and the modern-day Canadian artist Charles Meanwell from Owen Sound.

Once she has found her inspiration, she approaches the canvas. For Laurie, the most important part of the painting is the structure. The drawing divides the canvas into a composition which determines the relationships of space, which ultimately gives the meaning to the painting.

She says the finished piece can be no better than its initial drawing, so she spends time organizing her image and drawing.

"Before the paint goes on, the thrill should already be evident," she says. "If this is achieved I feel I can move on to the colour."

Next, she applies the colour with fast and direct brushstrokes. She is careful not to lose the energy she has just established. The colour must be right and strokes must be sure.



"Now I am in the zone - where once again time has no meaning.

"I feel each brush stroke should have its place and whether small or large it should be equally important to the final outcome. There is no room for error, each stroke gets its moment like minutes in a day. Just like life, there is no changing it or going over it. The space left between the brush strokes gives it energy and keeps it from becoming just an illusion of reality. Like music or mathematics, the painting must gain a life of its own."

Beginnings in a warehouse

In 2005 she was living in a warehouse studio on the east side of Toronto. When entering the darkness of the building a waft of talc would drift down from the rafters, a friendly reminder of the building's history as a cosmetic factory. In the corners of the dark and dingy halls stood stacks of small boxes crushing in on themselves from the weight of old textbooks piled on top. The boxes contained tubes of bright red lipsticks and small sample bottles of men's aftershave.

One evening in the dead of winter there was a knock on her studio door. There stood a stranger named Phil McCormack. His truck battery was dead and he needed a boost. It was dark and cold outside and the snow was about a foot deep. He hauled out his cables, arranged the vehicles and the two began to talk. He had

been looking for a studio for his partner, Debra Carroll. She was facing a deadline to paint the largest commission she had received to date.

Phil McCormack and Debra Carroll soon became her neighbours. When Phil and Debra decided to get married, move out of the city, and start a business, she decided to join them.

"So, the packing began and I made my first trip up to the Grey County and into the Beaver Valley. They located in the unlikely town of Clarksburg and the Loftgallery was born. The adventure turned out to include many trips back and forth through the valley and the growth of a great friendship."

Phil would often take Debra and Laurie on photo shoots to their favorite spots in the valley or Laurie might share a painting day with Debra in her studio. Debra once organized a project at the Loftgallery where she and Laurie and artist Peter Reid spent the weekend painting from the same image in her studio. She says the weekend was intense as they worked, backed into each other, listened to Peter's rock music, sometimes singing along, sometimes painting the strokes to the beat of the music.

Grey County called her name

"At the end of the weekend the paintings turned out so differently we had to tell people they were from the same image."

Laurie says she fell in love with Grey County on her first trip. The beauty of the rolling hills and the subtlety of the colour in the grasses



and the fields captured her. But it wasn't until her second trip, a week later on a wet spring day, that she fell in love with the barns of Grey County. They were neatly tucked away into the landscape as though they grew up from out of the ground. Their foundations were made of the rocks from the earth, and the barn boards were from the trees that had been cleared to work the land. Occasionally, the metal roofs would flash and reflect the sky.

She continued to paint the barns of southern Ontario for the next three years. The series included works from Grey County, Simcoe

Over the last few years, the Niagara Escarpment has come into her focus. The images of the forest's leaves and branches have allowed the interplay of alternating light and dark brush strokes that create what she calls "a visual percussion and a dance for the eyes." The vistas from the Escarpment have allowed her to lay down complementary colours, stroke by stroke and side by side. In her latest, most accomplished work, the series *Winter on the Escarpment*, the skies have opened up to create a paradox in perspective and the spaces behind the brush strokes have begun to sing their own arias.

When not in her studio, she says you will



County, Muskoka, including Wolfe Island, and surrounding areas. She has also done commission pieces of barns. One memorable success was a 6-foot by 9-foot triptych (one piece of art divided into three separate works) of a local barn just outside of Huntsville.

"I had the opportunity to install it in the cottage on Lake of Bays before the owner arrived home. When his children arrived they squealed with pleasure because first, this huge painting was unexpected and second, it turned out the barn belonged to a friend of theirs and they knew it intimately. The painting was already an old friend."

probably find her in the kitchen chopping garlic.

"The sensuality of food is my second love," she says. "Even morning porridge is prepared with care. I use only organic rolled oats cooked with dried cranberries and topped with stewed ripe fruits from last year's harvest. And let's not forget the topping of almonds, just toasted, to give it that little bit of crunch. My meals are like my paintings. They are developed with the same care for colour and relationship of flavour and texture. Often there will be guests at my table to share the latest perfected recipe."

To view more of Laurie's works, visit www.loftgallery.ca or www.decamillis.ca