



**WOLFGANG & LUKE**



November 18 Art Reception, December 9 Opening: The Works of Heather Smiley

## The Works of Heather Smiley

An introductory note  
by Tony Vander Park

Heather's Q & A remarks are interesting and not confined to the works on exhibit, nor to her reconciling past influences, but instead, she is giving us insight to her future direction as an artist. She is a serious person who is also a strong and healthy farm girl with lots of energy.

We (my wife Maria and I) were introduced to Heather in the late 70's when she was a Studio Major in the Fine Arts department at York University (Toronto, Canada). Following graduation, she entered Teacher's College. Like so many art students, me included, we were forced to earn a living elsewhere, in alternate fields. I am sure the students in Collingwood Ontario appreciated her.

As I recall, when she was at art school and afterwards, Heather always demonstrated a desire to produce meaningful work that was both progressive and important. She was also quick to utilize new technology like the Commodore 64 with its amazing colours (please remember this was the late 70's).

Upon retirement from teaching, she elected to revitalize her career as a visual artist, which had been put on the shelf. Because we have knowledge of Heather's visual art legacy, we understand that in fact this is a significant challenge...what will be the medium, the look and what is the message?

Time and experience allow the soul to see gold where previously it was over looked.

Heather opted for spiritual calm of painting, on board and canvas. It enables cost effective studies and experimentation in both large and small formats.

The body of work presented here, is diverse in substance, vision, and style. This appears to be her time, her phase where she is sorting things out. She is developing classical skills, such as oil paint mixed with wax. And I am pleased to say that already there are gems...This is an opportunity to acquire early works (relatively speaking).

We see at first pass, that she appears to be in step with our Canadian tradition of the narrative landscapes, akin to The Group of Seven and Tom Thompson. In Heather's responses to Sylvanna's questions, she admits that such offerings are emotionally familiar for her, and widely appreciated ('TransCanada Trail, West of Thunder Bay' and 'The Snowshoe Trail' and 'The TransCanada Trail, East of Nipagon').

But look again and we see her joy in depicting big sky's and atmospheric shorelines filled with mist that remind us of J.M.W. Turner ('Green Dreams' and 'Squall Past Meaford' and 'Manitoulin Morning'). These endeavors allow substantial forays into abstract expressionism.

And then we see her confidence in smaller works at 12” x 12” with tight graphic arrangements, painterly brush strokes and an expanded but subtle colour pallet. There are elements that remind me of Henri Matisse and Monet (‘Gray County Field’ and ‘Glen Huron December Morning’ and ‘Daffodils’)

Heather clearly loves paint and non-figurative exuberance. Before reading her Q & A replies, I had made an assumption about the real influence of J.P. Riopelle (‘December Roses’).

The WOLFGANG and LUKE presentation of the Works of Heather Smiley consumed her entire inventory. Clearly we can see that her sails are now catching the wind.

## **Interview Questions and Answers**

### **Sylvanna: Where and when did you go to art school?**

Heather: I attended York University from 1977-1981. I started off in a general arts program and then switched to Fine Arts in my second year. I also went to the High School of Commerce in Ottawa which offered a one-year program focusing on art.

### **What was the context of the world at the time you were going to school? What was the artistic climate? What were the influences generally?**

The mid to late 70's were like a hangover from the 1960's - it was as if the western world woke up after the gigantic party of the 60's and had to figure out what to do with the ideas and new ways of thinking that had been unleashed in the 60's...Some of them were useful, but we had to figure out how to make them a reality - one example that comes to mind is women's rights. The optimism of the 60's came up against the reality of an economy that wasn't functioning well. From an art perspective, it was a time when we were trying to make sense of all the art movements and counter movements. Abstract Expressionism had been dominant through the 50's and 60's but from the 60's into the 70's conceptual art, installations and video art were a big thing. Some of the biggest names in Canadian art at the time had turned away from painting and were making videos, installation pieces or happenings. It was a rejection of the big Abstract Expressionist paintings that demanded a lot of dedicated wall space. Some of the art schools in Canada continued to emphasize developing technical skills in drawing, painting, photography, sculpture, and printmaking. However, the focus at York University was predominantly on abstract, experimental, idea focused work. It meant that students at York excelled in theory, but they didn't get much training on the nuts and bolts of drawing and painting; the assumption was once you had a theoretical framework, you would develop the skills you needed to accomplish your vision.

### **What influenced you to become an artist?**

Good question - but I don't know if I have a good answer. I've always felt compelled to make or paint things - I remember that from an early age, and I always wanted to find a way to express the feelings I had about the world around me and art seemed the easiest way, even though I struggled with drawing and painting. I remember my excitement when my great-aunt who lived in Montreal, would come to visit. She taught me the proportions for drawing a face, and later,

she gave me a book of paintings from Picasso's Rose period, and I pored over that book. Maybe I was taken up with the spirit of rebellion from the 60's - I remember my father suggesting that I become a secretary and me thinking that there was no way I ever would do that!

### **Who influenced you then and who influences you now?**

I was very lucky when I was in Grade 8 that I had an excellent art teacher who took her art classes to the National Gallery in Ottawa and I saw work by the Group of Seven, Jean Paul Riopelle, and Guido Molinari. Later, when I went to art School at the High School of Commerce, the teachers regularly made sure that we went to the National Gallery. I remember seeing work by Joyce Weiland, Gathie Falk, Emily Carr and Rita Letendre. What has stayed with me over the years is the emotional quality of the way they use colour - all of them use colour the way a composer chooses notes. But I know that those artists would have looked back to Fauves, the Post-Impressionist, and Impressionists for their inspiration, so they are part of my influence also. The artist whose work I always look at is Mark Rothko - he is an absolute master of colour. So all those artists continue to influence me but I also have some contemporary favourites - Jamie Evrard, Bobbie Burgers, Gabriella Collier, to name a few.

### **Who have been the teachers who have impacted you as an artist?**

I've been fortunate to have some excellent teachers - the first was Ms. Leibman, who bravely took us grade 8 farm kids to the National Gallery in Ottawa and exposed us to the kind of art none of us saw at home. The second was Carol Bretzlaff, who saw that I wanted to learn more about art and encouraged me to study art after high school. Two other teachers come to mind - Wilma Pinkus, who taught still life drawing and Daphne Collier who taught life drawing at the High School of Commerce. They had high standards and expected the world of you, so you reached up to meet their expectations!

### **You took on a career as a teacher – did you paint all the while?**


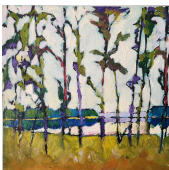


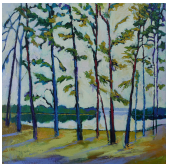
No... I had several decades when the demands of raising a family and working put art in the back seat. I didn't do much painting, but I did continue to draw because it's easy to pick up a pencil. Drawing really is at the heart of art, so while it may not have done much with colour, drawing helped me think about expression, composition and value.

## Have you always been a landscape artist?

I have always been drawn to rural landscapes because that is the world I grew up in and it's where I feel most at home, but I did mostly abstract painting and sculpture when I was at York University. However I returned to landscape painting when I started painting again because I guess I was looking for something familiar, and I wanted to reassure myself that I could actually draw and paint and make something that looked believable. I have taken a few courses in plein air painting, which is a discipline in its own right. You have to take everything you know about composition, value, and colour and apply it on the spot. The line between landscape painting and abstract can be pretty blurry, and the more I paint, the more I want to move closer to that blurry line where you can see that a painting may be rooted in landscape, but has abstract qualities.

## Can you tell us about/show us your process?

It's not a straight line, that's for sure. Some paintings just seem to paint themselves and others have to be pulled backwards through the thistles. I start with either a plein air sketch or a photo I've taken. (Thank goodness for smartphones - I never go anywhere without a camera) From there, I'll make several pencil sketches to figure out the composition and the format. Sometimes I'll make a small paint sketch to get test out the composition with colour. Sometimes, I'll just play around with the colours I'm thinking of using. Next, I'll use India ink to draw in the bones of the composition on the canvas and then throw on a thin layer of colour to get rid of the white of the canvas.

 Photo Aug/22	 Sketch on paper	 India ink on canvas
 Canvas with underpainting	 Finished painting	

## **What are your thoughts on the environmental activist who recently smeared pink paint on a Tom Thompson?**

I fully support the goal of environmentalists to bring our attention to the precarious state of our environment and the appalling lack of action on the part of governments all over the world. But throwing paint at art or gluing themselves to art has got to be the most misguided PR stunt I've ever seen.

## **Why do you paint?**

Another good question, and it's something I ask myself a lot. Painting isn't always easy because you set your sights high and what you make, even when you try your best, usually doesn't measure up to the goals you had set. And your success or failure is entirely on you - what you make is directly a result of your choices and you really can't shift the responsibility anywhere else. So, you have to develop a thick skin and keep painting even when your ego may be taking a bit of a kicking. But painting also brings great joy - everywhere you look you see colour and light that brings joy. Painting and drawing are also a way to lose yourself/escape from sadness and grief and worry and come out with something positive. So, in a nutshell, it's a way to embrace life, with all its thorns and roses.

## **Is there anything notable that you'd be willing to share about yourself, your path, your art?**

For anyone who says they would like to paint, but don't have the talent - one of my teachers reminded me that it's one percent inspiration and 99% perspiration.

