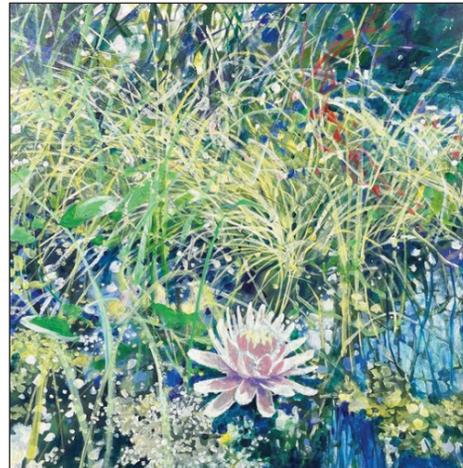
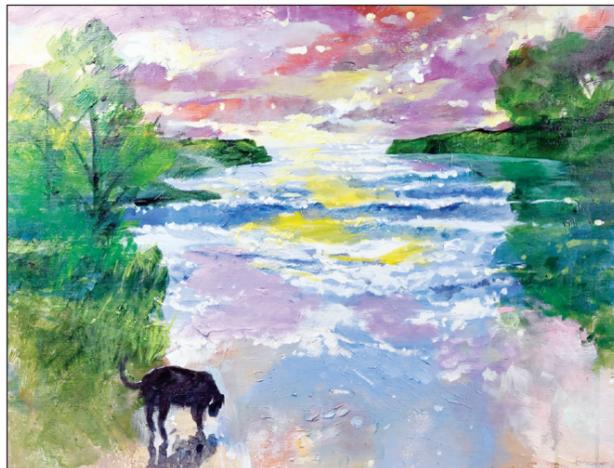


“Before I moved to the County, I was not much into painting Nature. Now that I am living in it, I want to paint it all the time.”



ARTISTS OF THE COUNTY

Story by Janet Davies | Photos by Peggy deWitt

JOHN LAWSON

PAINTER ON THE RIVER



“What would I call my painting style?” John Lawson ponders the question. He’s not dismissing it, he just doesn’t have a ready answer. “I guess it’s realism rendered in a sort of abstract style. Does that work?”

I’m not fluent in “art speak,” but Impressionist is the word that came to my mind when we stepped into the small space that serves as John’s studio, until he can start work on renovations. For now, he and his wife and twin sons have squeezed what they can from their old house in the city into their new old house on the banks of Milford’s Black River.

John is a prolific painter and the little studio is packed wall to wall, floor to ceiling with canvases. He has more in storage in Picton. “I just want to paint,” he says with a shrug.

They came to the County from Toronto where he was lucky to live near the water, now he’s delighted with their humble home in a gorgeous location with the ‘black creek’ at the bottom of the garden.

“I’ve been painting forever, for 50 years. It’s always been like my escape room, something I can do and really enjoy,” he says. “There’s been quite a few twists

and turns in my working life. A degree in Philosophy and Fine Art at the University of Toronto and later a degree in Architecture, and I’ve been doing that for a few years. But I’ve always wanted to return to art. That’s what I’m trying to do now. I still work because I have to, but,” he grins, “I do mainly cottages, so I don’t have to sit in an office in the city. I can work anywhere, but I’d still rather be painting.”

John began to paint a lot more landscapes and celebrate the natural world when the family started coming to the County regularly. “It was a great place to visit when the boys were young,” he says. “Now I would say I’m painting mostly Nature. We’ll see how that goes,” he says cheerfully. John appears to be many things, but pretentious is not one of them.

“My early work was mostly representational. In fact with abstracts I find I sometimes get a little lost. I focus a lot better with an actual topic, a real subject.”

Peggy was enchanted by his paintings of otters. There’s also a recurring woman’s face in his work and several of the canvasses we saw feature children. Is it his family? I should have asked.

There is a tenderness in the faces and gestures of his



“people” pictures and a free and joyous feel to his wild water, plants and skies and weather, his “Nature stuff.”

As well as a multitude of paintings, two 21-year-old sons and his wife, John shares his home with three dogs, a cheery old Golden Doodle, who’s short, woolly and wide; a leggy old Labradoodle who must have been very elegant in their prime but who’s now just bony and slow, yet game enough to be disappointed when they couldn’t come with us down to the river; and a younger dog who was out.

I ask John what is the hardest part for him about painting. Apart from having to tear himself away from it to deal with clients. He thinks about it. “I can sometimes get lost in my work in a different way,” he says. “My brain kind of expands, and I have to pull it back a bit. Does that makes sense? I need to be aware of getting more of myself in things, create work that has *me* in it, especially now I am trying to paint more full time. I want people to be able to see a piece and say “Oh, that’s John Lawson’s work! And it’s starting to happen. I’m doing it.”

So what gets in the way of that? He bursts out laughing. “Me! I’m not selective enough in my themes, I just love to paint. I just want to paint. It’s really a case of reining myself in. I think some of the more successful artists have a more limited group of themes they concentrate on, they deliberately restrict themselves but then dig deep into them. Me? I just start and go wherever it goes. And I paint fast, too, so it’s dab, dab, whoosh!”

He’s easy to talk with, and very engaging.

Okay, I ask, then what’s the easiest part for you?

Surprisingly he thinks about that for just as long.

“That’s harder to say. If something is easy for you, you don’t spend much time thinking about why that is.” He drums his fingers and looks toward the water.

“I remember someone talking about batting coaches in baseball. They take the best batters and make them into coaches, then often discover they have no idea why they

are good at what they do and don’t know how to teach someone else to be good at it.” He brings his gaze back.

“I’d say the easiest part for me is the process being so enjoyable. I don’t strain. It doesn’t feel like work. Oh, I occasionally get stuck or hit a bump, but as long as I have the time and,” he looks around ruefully, “the space, I can do it. Architecture is work for me. I mean I love architecture, studying great buildings but not all the techno detail, and that is becoming a bigger part of it. A representation on a computer of a great building, or any building just feels cold and lifeless to me.”

John has some paintings on show at the Loft Gallery upstairs in the Local Store, and he will be Studio No. 24 on this year’s Prince Edward County Studio Tour. “I’m really looking forward to that,” he says.

I’m hesitant, but I ask, “Do you think you’ll have your studio ready for it?” And here is his genuine laughter again. “Good point! I guess I’d better get on that.” We talk about how he could set up and greet guests in the garden with its huge trees and golden sunlight.

As part of the coming renovations, he is designing two additional structures for the property, pavilions he calls them: one a multi-purpose garage/studio/storage space, the other a purpose built pavilion for the boys. “It’s a bit of culture shock for them moving here from the city,” he smiles. “But it’s inspired them to pass their driving test.”

The river sparkles silently. The neighbours’ chickens make a contented racket, and John Lawson looks pretty contented himself as we say our goodbyes. On the way out, I notice a huge, surrealist painting of a part-man/part bird. “That’s an old one,” he says. And then we see a big beautiful diptych that I recognize as the very spot where Peggy shot John’s portrait. Having just stood right there, we can appreciate how well this artist paints Nature, and how beautifully he’s captured the world at the bottom of his garden. □

