

PAMELA CARTER

“At art school everybody wanted to break new ground, to push the boundaries. I didn’t want that ... I wanted to learn how to paint like the old masters.”



Pamela Carter doesn't mind being called traditional, in fact she's proud of it. One look at her work proves that traditional is not the same as staid.

Her paintings pulse with energy. They exude warmth and celebrate the world we live in, because Pam paints what she sees around her, right here, right now. She favours streetscapes and local scenery, with people passing by, over the unpopulated landscapes of many, admittedly very fine, modern paintings.

Are my prejudices showing?

Okay, I admit it, I like representational art, and I think it's sad how dismissive the art world can be about figurative works: traditional paintings with people in them.

If people in their neighbourhoods were good enough subjects for Vermeer, Toulouse Lautrec and the other Impressionists, why not us? Those artists gave us glorious records of a place in time. I fret that today's fine artists seem to ignore ordinary people in everyday clothes, the cars, shopfronts and daily sights of our real lives.

So I was delighted to see Pam Carter's new paintings of Wellington. They're new because she's only lived in Wellington for a couple of years, but in that short time she has nailed it - captured on canvas the character of her town and of other places in the County.

When I visited her little house and studio on West Street the first thing that struck me was the abundance of light in every room. The second thing was her cat who dived into my bag, curled up and refused to let me in, grabbing at me with his sharp little claws when I tried to retrieve my notebook. I gave him a clip upside the head and he was gracious in defeat, following us around the house as Pam showed me her work.

She told me the bright, clear light was a clincher for her, too, when she bought the house; also the coloured glass panels that adorn one huge window. "Look at that," she said. "Primary colours, red, yellow and blue. This is meant to be an artist's house!"

Pamela Carter taught high school art classes in Montreal for many years. She tells the story of a student who watched her drawing one day and said, "Miss, you're so good, you should be a real artist." It made her laugh, but it also made her think.

blodge of red paint into the pale wall and it didn't seem to ruin the picture.

She does a lot of this when she's painting outside. "I'll be engrossed in my work and then sit back to stretch and look around and jump to see people standing close behind me peering over my shoulder," she laughed. "They ask what I'm doing and I tell them, and show them. The kids are the most fun because they are unselfconscious."

Two little girls were watching her work in Wellington last year, and she told them they could see some of her finished paintings in the SideStreet Gallery down the road.

"I heard later that these two little kids went by themselves into Paulette's gallery and explained they were there to look at their

friend's paintings please. I thought that was pretty special."

Another time she was painting with workshop students beside the St. Lawrence river in Quebec when a man and his daughters came over to look.

"The smallest child asked me in French 'Oh Madame, did you do that all by yourself?' I told her yes and asked if she would like to paint a little on my canvas. She was delighted and painted a small wobbly red heart on the bottom. I invited her sister, who was hanging back, if she would like to do one, too. She said, 'Oh no, Madame. I'm not good at hearts'."

"But I encouraged her to add her little splodge, and then decided to leave the painting just as it was." It hangs in her kitchen, looking even more Impressionistic than usual because it's unfinished,

but the two little hearts in the bottom right hand corner remind her of that day, of the children and of the joy of involving people in her work.

At the Art in the County show this summer, I saw people linger long in front of her two paintings. Mostly, they were smiling. I saw a sigh or two. I know I enjoyed the pleasure of looking into a warm, quiet afternoon in a small town. It felt like the painting was in a good mood, and, as I walked away, so was I. □

PAM CARTER

Continued from Page 34

She said people who rely only on photographs have to overcome the drawbacks of copying a two-dimensional image with its flattened, even distorted planes. And they might never know that real life shadows are not in fact black.

Light is key in all of Pam's work. "I love back lighting," she said, pointing to a painting in her office that shows what light can do for a mundane, some might even say ugly, view. From her balcony in Toronto she painted a high rise condominium tower being built a few blocks away. It's an angular black skeleton against the sky with cranes leaning toward it and congested traffic at its feet.

She painted it in the evenings, with the sun going down and filling the space between the bones with fire.

"See the edges of each floor," she said. "That orange plastic protective stuff? Every evening when the light hit at the right angle, it turned to gold." That's backlighting. Where others might have urban blight, Pam painted an act of creation as majestic as a pyramid - and why not? There's beauty in the ordinary, if we only stop to notice.

Another city painting is a hot dog stand in downtown Toronto, or possibly Montreal, I didn't ask. Again it invokes good feelings about the city. It's dark, the streets are wet, lights are shining blue, red and gold and the old hot dog seller is handing supper-on-the-run to a young couple. You can almost hear the rain and the cars. It gave me a prickle of nostalgia for the city that I honestly haven't felt for years. A romanticized vision? Maybe. But it felt true to me, and you just know the painter had been standing in that rain soaking up the feeling to lay it down on canvas.

If she can make dirty old downtown look good, imagine what she does with County scenes.

"My style is impressionistic, but

realistic, too," she said showing me several works in progress in her studio that she was preparing for her show at SideStreet Gallery in September.

"This is Wellington in 2010," she said, indicating two different views of Main Street. "We all know it's going to change, and I want to record it like it is. I paint the Wellington Grill a lot, I love it. You can feel the age there, the old counter, the booths."



She also enjoys seeing the two elderly gents who sit on the bench outside the Grill to drink their coffee every morning. "Vicky brings their coffee out to them to save their legs," said Pam. "I believe their names are Beef and Frank." I checked the names with Vicky who confirmed I'd got it right, then pointed out the photo on her wall of the two of them sitting on the bench with another fellow, who had since passed away.

Pam wondered, "What will happen to that place in the future? Will a shiny, flashy, chrome thing take its place?"

She doesn't only paint old places, but she's making sure they get their fair share of canvas space.

Her street scenes include people, because her town includes people. Here's a man walking a dog, here's a woman strolling from one shop to another, here's a kid on a skateboard.

"Here's Ted Nash who runs Home Hardware," she said, showing me an unfinished study of two men talking beside parked cars,

just outside the doorway of the shop.

"I didn't paint this because it's him. He just happened to be there, and the light was wonderful, the shapes were great, and they stood there talking long enough for me to rough them in."

"When I teach, I like to get people to draw upside down," she said. "It helps them to really see the shape of things, so they don't just draw or paint what they think they know a foot or a leg or a peach looks like. I say 'it's not a foot, it's a shape, draw the shape,' and if they do it, they'll get a better picture."

She held an almost life-sized painting of two small children in summer dresses upside down to show me. "See the shape of the legs now," she asked. "See the negative space in between? It's curved and you can see it better this way. You're not tempted to draw standard straight legs."

She clearly sees with an artist's eyes, and having used a lot of ink telling you about her representational work, I must not forget to mention that Pam is painting a lot more abstract work these days.

"I found myself really enjoying the brushwork quite apart from how the picture was coming along," she told me. "I thought, 'I want to do more of this!' When someone saw one of my abstracts they said 'Oh, I didn't know you did that,' and I replied 'I didn't know it, either.'"

Interviewing Pam was fun. She is so enthusiastic, and she must have been a helluva good teacher. She loves to demonstrate things. She talked about how important it is to learn how to draw, and how people who are impatient to learn to paint don't always want to hear that.

"Painting is drawing," she said. "Drawing with a big brush," and she took a brush lying on a pallet and made quick strokes on an unfinished painting on her easel. I was aghast, thinking she was messing up a painting to illustrate a point. But no. She worked the

“When I first came here I painted outdoors all summer, including on the sidewalks in Wellington, and it was a great way to bond with the community. Everybody comes up and talks to you.

People came out to offer me a drink and stayed to talk.”

Her friends Ursula and Bob Riendeau of Wellington had introduced her to the County, but soon Pam



found she was introducing *them* to new people. “Ursula was my roommate in 1963. It’s funny, isn’t it? I feel like I’ve come full circle.”

“It would be great to have a Prince Edward County plein aire painting festival,” she said. “The Loyalist Parkway alone is a paradise for plein aire painters, there are fabulous scenes all along it.”

In July, she took part in an event called Paint the County, when about 20 artists set up easels and painted outdoors on Picton Main Street for a day, then auctioned their work in the evening to raise funds for Alternatives for Women.

“In California there’s a two week plein aire festival. Painters come from all over to take part, and buyers actually line up waiting for work to be finished so they can buy it.” Artists, are you listening?



Pam figures she’s taken more than 5,000 photographs around the County since she came here. Does she paint from photographs?

“Absolutely,” she said. “You have to really. No matter how much I prefer to paint from life, to be out there, there are always the bugs, the rain, people parking their cars in front of you, the light keeps changing.”

“I think all painters use pho-

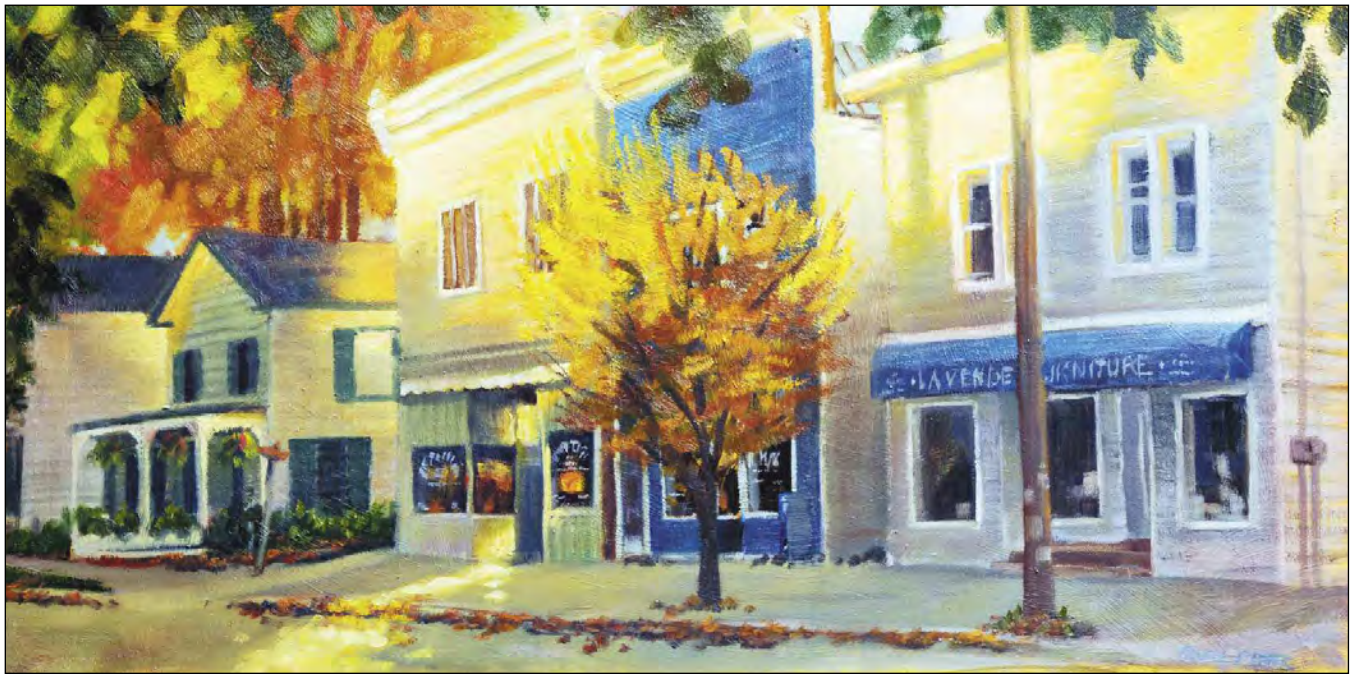
tographs for reference. But there’s a big difference between painting solely from photographs and actually being there, absorbing the feeling and movement and vibration of a place. It shows if someone paints a place they haven’t spent any time in. If you’ve *been* there, you know what you’re trying to catch. The photos just help to remind you.”

certain age the chance to get out early, Pam leapt at it, and in 1997 became what her student would call 'a real artist,' a full-time painter.

Toronto and her medium from pastels to oils.

"I didn't want to live with pastel dust," she explained. "I turned my new living/dining room into a

In Toronto she taught workshops and private school classes and within four years moved again, this time to Prince Edward County.



On these pages: The play of light is paramount in Pam's paintings, some of which seem to radiate their own light. A workshop with a master portrait painter changed Pam's life. A self-portrait of Pam working *plein aire*.

Artist readers will be grinning now, anxious to hear how that worked out for eating and paying bills.

"I taught workshops for adults, too," she said. "I was on a workshop circuit with the Pastel Society teaching in Calgary, Vancouver, even New Mexico. There's quite a sub-culture of pastel lovers, you know."

In 2005 Pam moved herself to

studio, so I was living and working in the same space, and dry pastel dust just gets everywhere, no matter what you do."

She laughed. "Pastel artists are in denial. We know it's not good for us, but we do it anyway. So I switched to oils, which a lot of people think are also unacceptable today. Toxic and all that." She sighed. "What can you do? I prefer oils to acrylic."

"I'm home, now," she said. "My mother, who is 95, came by train from Vancouver with my brother to visit me here. She very much approved of Wellington. She told me that, finally, I am where I should be."

PAMELA'S ART

Pam Carter loves to paint *en plein aire*, which simply means 'in the open air.'

“When you teach and have a family, there’s no time or energy to pursue your own work, it’s like an English Literature teacher who might be a great novelist but has no time to find out.”

To discover what she might be, Pam signed up for a workshop with a master portrait painter in the States.

“I applied for a sabbatical and flew from Montreal, in the dead of winter, to Florida where I painted with this man for two weeks, surrounded by others doing the same, just painting and learning and discovering. It changed my life.”

Back home, she threw herself into painting with dry pastels. A prize-winning picture in her kitchen illustrates her talent in the medium. The subject is unexceptional: a jam jar, some fruit, pretty plates etc., but the colour and light are as sumptuous and rich as any old master’s oils, and the *Montreal Gazette* lying



among the breakfast things shows her fondness for contemporary detail.

“Dry pastels were my first love,” she said. “I was president of the Pastel Society of Eastern Canada or PSEC.” (A good bilingual acronym because ‘sec’ is also French for ‘dry.’)

When the Quebec government offered teachers of a