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N e i g h b o u r s o f
FOREST HILL



Back To Nature *with*
Elaine Rakowski



Elaine with one of her father's sculptures

Photos by Tom Sandler

Back To Nature

with Elaine Rakowski

By Mollie Wilkins

Looking at Elaine Rakowski's landscape paintings evokes many emotions at once: there's the beauty of the scene (a dramatic view of Patagonia mountains or simply a tree in full bloom in Forest Hill Park); there's the incredible use of colour (sometimes subtle, sometimes bold and bright); there's the realism of the work that lends visual interest; the sense of abstraction where appropriate, but most of all there's a serenity to each piece that makes you pause and reflect and just breathe in the calm of nature. "To take something that may seem ordinary and transform it is what I try to do."

Elaine and her husband have lived in their Forest Hill home for 40 years. Their three children all live in Toronto and she is blessed with four grandsons and a 'grandpuppy'. "We love the neighbourhood, the Village and especially the Beltline," she says. "And we are grateful our kids live here." Although Elaine's artistic talents have been with her since she was a young girl (she can't remember a time while growing up that she didn't draw), it wasn't until later in life that she decided to formally pursue them. First came a 25-year-long successful career in dentistry. "I loved the people," she smiles. "It was hard work but very interesting." But by the time she reached her mid-forties, her father (who was a talented sculptor) was unable to pursue his art due to Alzheimer's and Elaine just realized that it was time. So she sold her practice in the early 2000s and got to work!

"I paint to help people see what is important," she says. "To move myself and others."

Elaine studied at the Academy of Realist Art in Toronto, graduating in 2011. "Being an artist requires constant learning," she says. "Although we trained in Figure and Still Life, I decided that Landscape is where my heart is, so I focus all of my energy on that." And a good thing too, as each painting can take over 100 hours to complete. She's currently finishing up a series of Patagonia landscapes that will be exhibited at her solo show at The Art Square Gallery in Toronto from May 6 to June 3, 2019. I had the pleasure of seeing an 'almost finished' piece in her studio. As we sat together, Elaine walked me through her process, pointing to different parts of the painting and showing me what had been done, and what still needed to be done.

"I have a good digital camera and so it starts with a series of photographs from which I create a composition," she says. "First I transfer to canvas, drawing free hand with very thin paint." Pointing to a dramatic mountain range she continues, "You start with the largest structures first, then go smaller and smaller with each layer of oil paint, each layer essentially being a rehearsal for the next

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Elaine in her home



The Torres



Path Less Taken



Whispering Trees

layer, until the final effect is achieved. Blending and multiple layers of glazes over a light background can create the kind of luminous effect that I'm after." This practice involves an incredible amount of patience and attention to detail, but it suits Elaine. "I'm very patient," she smiles. "and I love classical music and so when I paint and listen to music, it's a very Zen experience." She often paints at home, but also has a studio at the Academy so she'll go there a few days a week. "It's great to be part of a community where art is being made and to have the feedback and perspective of other artists."

Travel is another big part of Elaine's life, and she finds inspiration in nature around the world. Scotland, Hawaii and Fogo Island are just some of her favourite spots thus far. Even so, she feels there is so much to appreciate in our own backyard – Southern Ontario, and closer to home, the Kay Gardener Beltline for instance. "I think there is visual complexity and beauty everywhere if you stop to look. There is so much we miss because we're distracted." And there's also a spiritual aspect that motivates her and takes her to a different place. In a world that is becoming more and more fast-paced, Elaine creates a feeling in a painting that expresses that kind of longing for nature. It's very healing, soothing and she manages to take you away – even just for a short while – from the chaos of urban life. Elaine's art enables us to "stop and be in the moment, the here and the now, in a world that is ever moving faster and faster, and where sound bites and visual attention become ever shorter," she explains.

Each piece has the power to create meaning for the individual – whether it's a memory of a particular place or a dream or an emotion – and so each piece becomes personal and reflective for the viewer. "By painting I try to preserve the experience of the ephemeral moment and show others that experience," she explains. But at the same time there is the hope that we can connect with something universal in a painting that speaks to all of us."

While we all certainly can't possess the kind of talent it takes to create these works, we are so lucky to be able to share in the appreciation and beauty of the natural world that Elaine conveys. "I paint to help people see what is important," she says. "To move myself and others." And she succeeds in doing just that.

You can see more of Elaine's work at www.elainerakowski.com



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