



TOM FORRESTALL

*Recent Works*

CREATIVE PROCESS TO RESOLVE A CONCLUSION TO  
PRESSION. PAINTING: DIRECTLY FROM THE MOTIF  
ATCHES MADE ON SITE, AND FROM IMAGINATION,  
MEMORY, THIS IS ONE, A CAT IN A TREE. IT IS  
PATOR, NO TOP OR BOTTOM, HANG ANY WAY ONE CHOOSES.  
IS DIRECTLY UNDER THE CAT, THERE IS ONLY ONE  
GHT UP. MY EXPERIENCE WITH PAINTING FROM  
ED CREATIVE IMAGINATION IS ONE OF PAINTING  
SIDE OUT. BY SO DOING THERE IS A CLOSER DEEPER  
THE WHOLE. MANY DRAWINGS WERE DONE —  
TION OF MANY CATS SEEN IN TREES. MY  
RAW TO FILL MY HEAD AND PAINT TO EMPTY IT"  
THE STORY. THE DRAWINGS BUILD A VISION AND  
AS CONFIDENCE THAT THE DEFINITIVE PAINTING  
T HAPPENS NEXT IS ONE OF THOSE MYSTERIOUS HAPPENINGS  
WILDS MY PASSION AND MY SINGULARITY TO PAINT.  
DEVELOPS TAKES ON A LIFE OF ITS OWN. MARCHING FROM  
AWINGS, MY VISION, UP TO ABOUT HALFWAY I'M IN  
- OBEYS ALL ORDERS... BUT AS THIS LIFE GROWS AND TAKES  
DE, MADE ITS SERVANT. WHEN FINALLY WITH THE PAINTING'S  
PARATION IS MESSY, THE VISION HAS BEEN FAILED.  
HEAD SO CRYSTAL CLEAR COULD NOT BE HELD IN MY  
MAGINATION IS BORN ANEW AND A TOTAL NEW CONCEPT  
AND THAT PASSION TO DRAW AND FILL MY HEAD. ALMOST FROM  
E THERE'S FAILING AND SUCCESS MAKEING IT ALL MY OWN, A STAMP  
N IS FAILED (TO SUCCEED WITH THE VISION IS THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM)  
F. THANK YOU FOR YOUR  
ING JUST GO SLOWER AND SLOWER WITH IT.

# TOM FORRESTALL

## *Recent Works*

Essay by Dr. Eva Seidner

June 25 – September 10, 2016



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Cover image: **Barrier at Distant Lake** (detail) May, June 2014 egg tempera on board 21 3/4 x 47 inches



Tom Forrestall in his studio, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

# *I draw to fill my head and paint to empty it*

Tom Forrestall

TOM FORRESTALL was born in the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia in 1936 and studied with Alex Colville and Lawren P. Harris at Mount Allison University, graduating in 1958.

Throughout his career, Forrestall has received many awards and honours including Member of the Royal Canadian Academy of the Arts (1973), Order of Canada (1986), and the 125th Anniversary of Canada Medal (1992).

Tom Forrestall's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally in numerous solo and group exhibitions including Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax; Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, New Brunswick; McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario (retrospective). His work is found in numerous international private, corporate, and public collections including Art Gallery of Hamilton; Art Gallery of Nova Scotia; Art Gallery of Ontario; Beaverbrook Art Gallery; Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia; Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montréal; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; National Gallery of Hungary, Budapest; Owens Art Gallery, Sackville, New Brunswick; Winnipeg Art Gallery; Irving Oil; McCain Foods; Rideau Hall, Ottawa; RBC Financial Group; Scotiabank, and Via Rail.

Tom Forrestall lives and works in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, and is represented exclusively by Mira Godard Gallery.



## **Transforming Memory: Recent Works by Tom Forrestall**

Atlantic light and the natural world of his native Nova Scotia have inspired Tom Forrestall for well over six decades. He has responded by creating resonant works of realism which “hold the mirror up to Nature” in both the physical and metaphysical sense. Stroke by stroke and layer by layer, he brings every element in his paintings to vibrant verisimilitude. At the same time his representations of the physical realm ring with the mystery which lies at the core of the created world and at the heart of the artist’s vision.

Each painting is an attempt to capture this mysterious intangible, “the deeper reality”, in Forrestall’s phrase, and to show the viewer something of its ubiquity and its truth. He accepts the difficulties of achieving this act of revelation as part of his defining purpose as an artist. “Deep inside you don’t want things to come easy,” he writes in one of his sketchbooks. “One embraces the struggles ... so that in the final expression one truly feels [one has] gone the country mile, made the greatest effort ... I may fail the Vision absolutely. But not the Self.”

It is his willingness, indeed eagerness, to confront obstacles which accounts for the presence of physical and visual barriers in the foreground of so many of his works: chain-link fences, tangled networks of twigs and branches partially blocking the view, fog and blowing snow, trailings of ribbons and bits of garbage caught among foliage, even the artist’s own hand held up in front of a doorway. All these our eyes encounter and must penetrate before we gain access to the middle and far grounds of the paintings.

Whether they are natural or manmade, the “things” in Forrestall’s paintings are charged with life. Inanimate objects carry their own histories, as if they were emissaries from different times and places mysteriously come to rest in the single, common moment of the image and suspended in a kind of waking dream. The viewer may feel that he has come upon an open-ended drama whose opening scenes he has missed and whose outcome is unknowable.

Sometimes the action takes place offstage or in semi-darkness (“Moon at Dawn”, p. 55) or behind a scrim of foliage (“The Lake”, p. 15). Sometimes the actors are only partly visible — an eye, a hand, a mouth — or barely discernible in the distance (“Open Winter”, p. 35). At other times their presence is implied but not depicted: a ball hurled through a window which explodes into shards, a silver spoon or a pair of eyeglasses dropped among withered leaves, an empty car left with the motor running and the driver’s door standing open (“Horizon”, p. 19). Although we can readily identify their components, the images themselves possess a quality of strangeness. Forrestall presents the details of everyday objects so precisely that their visual clarity is almost preternatural. Yet the more precise the surface looks, the less “real” it feels. This felt disjunction between precision and reality is an essential part of Forrestall’s art. His images project physical accuracy while stirring the unconscious — intuition and memory.

Indeed memory and its mechanisms play an essential role in his creative process. His work often begins with a walk along the beach or a ramble by a frozen lake, excursions into landscapes near his Dartmouth studio. He fills his sketchbooks with freely-worked drawings of anything, large or small, that catches his eye and spurs his imagination, trying out ideas and gathering sights and impressions, building his ideal vision of how the finished work might look. He has candid stream-of-consciousness dialogues with himself, annotating his sketches with random thoughts and musings as they arise. To leaf through his sketchbooks is to experience something of his exuberant and sometimes quirky way of seeing, and the swiftness with which he is able to translate glimpses into images. Condensed versions of his written notes appear on the backs of completed paintings, where the script changes colour as the topics of his conversation with himself shift. To read the back of a Forrestall painting is to trace its progress on the front.

He regards drawing and painting as two distinct steps in the creation of a work of art. Watercolours, painted outdoors within an hour or two, provide a related but separate language for capturing the mood and spirit of specific landscape settings. Fluid and aesthetically complete in themselves, these may reappear as echoes in the landscape elements of his egg tempera paintings. Drawing for him is playful, quick, and spontaneous, done *in situ* and usually in the open air. Painting in egg tempera is slow, meticulous, and contemplative, done in the controlled environment of the artist's studio. Memory begins its complex process of editing, of remembering and forgetting, even as Forrestall is driving home to his studio with his lively sketchbooks at his side.

Whether he is working in tempera or in acrylics, he diligently builds his paintings using the short, meticulous strokes of tempera technique which he learned in the mid-1950s as a student of Alex Colville's and continues to favour. The very slowness of laying down the multiple layers of paint is contemplative, allowing him to remain open and responsive to feelings and memories. Making no attempt to replicate any specific scene from his walks (he deliberately does not take photographs), he gradually relinquishes conscious control of everything but technique. As the painting grows it overtakes his original intentions, even determining its own shape according to the needs of the evolving image. Things which he had intended to include are jettisoned, replaced by objects or scenes from other remembered times and places, creating a composite of the artist's personal memories and experiences. About half-way through the painting he agrees to "fail", to surrender his early vision and intention and allow the painting to dictate its own course. "It gets away from me," he explains, without regret. "It has its own life."

What's interesting is how successful these subjective and sometimes eccentric failures are in connecting with the viewer's own sense of how familiar, yet strange, the world can seem. In "The Visitor" (p. 41) for example (which brings to mind Colville's "Professor of Romance Languages"), a determined-looking man wearing a jacket and tie stands in a field in front of a helicopter, gazing intently at something offstage and oblivious of the fire which is consuming another field, behind him. Who and where he is, what thoughts preoccupy him, why he has come (and in a vehicle resembling, in this particular context, a gigantic mutant locust) — all such questions



have no single, specific answer. Nor can we identify the individual sources from which Forrestall has culled the various elements of his image. But we do have our own personal experiences of being preoccupied, and we have known irony and incongruity. Like so much of Forrestall's work, this painting has a quality of universality which borders on metaphor.

In their composition, many of his landscape works are divided into horizontal areas which guide the viewer's eye past the foreground barriers and into the middle and far distances of the scene. Often our vantage point is below the centre of interest in the painting (the cat in the treetops in "Hunter Watching" (p. 29) the low-flying plane in "November Landing", p. 23) or high above it. "Finder's Gaze" (p. 21) for example, situates us at the edge of a still, blue lake, looking down. Tall grass and the trunks and branches of spruce trees create a kind of filigree curtain. A breeze stirs the long, soft needles, animating the foreground with gentle movement. Through the curtain of vegetation we observe a kayaker who is himself looking down at something in the water. He has stopped paddling in mid-stroke, his oar a perfectly vertical line. His central position and his very stillness make him the focal point of the composition.

What is the kayaker "finding" that so engages him? Does he see something at the bottom of the lake or, like Narcissus, is he fascinated by his own reflection? Is he, perhaps, looking beyond his shimmering mirror image and reflecting in the deeper sense? For Forrestall, painting is self-revelatory. The act of painting releases memory and promotes introspection, with the result that as each work slowly comes to life, it replenishes the artist's fount of creativity by expanding his self-knowledge. By implication, the same reward awaits the engaged viewer who takes the time to look and reflect.

Given its ambiguities and the associative way in which it grows, a Forrestall work defies being "boxed in" within strict, right-angled boundaries. For years Forrestall has railed against the notorious "tyranny of the rectangle" and has shaped his boards and canvases according to the needs of the image. Citing the use of shaped canvases in the 1960s and 70s by abstract painters like Kenneth Noland and Frank Stella, he cannot understand why representational artists have not pursued similar strategies. In "Finder's Gaze" (p. 21) he has even painted a motif of fronds or pine needles onto the polygon frame, allowing the image to "overflow". While images must of necessity start and stop somewhere, the artist vehemently argues that their confines must not be predetermined. He does employ traditional non-rectangular shapes — tondos, ovals, octagons, lunettes — but more often creates images in the shape of various kinds of polygon. As a result his paintings retain something of the traditional stability of the rectangle (particularly at the base, usually their broadest side) and at the same time introduce an element of unpredictability. The implication is that complacency is never a legitimate response to what we think we see. What seems familiar can never be fully known.

Forrestall puts an interesting spin on even the most traditional shapes. "Two Trees" (p. 11) is executed in the shape of a circle and "November Landing" (p. 23) in that of an octagon, but both can be fully turned and suspended in any way satisfying to the viewer. "Hunter Watching" (p. 29) too, though a polygon, is what

Forrestall calls a “rotator”, Since perspective influences perception, our understanding of what we are looking at depends on our point of view. Forrestall’s title indicates that the plane which is flying uncomfortably low over our heads in “November Landing” (p. 23) is descending. But if you rotate the picture and hang it upside down, the plane is taking off, ascending. The two scenarios elicit quite different emotional responses from the viewer looking up at the aircraft, which is directly overhead. Again the image refuses to be defined or seen in any single correct way. Our determination of what is “real” depends on the eye of the beholder.

“An Early Blizzard” (p. 25) is a gentle meditation on looking. In muted tones of blue-grey and white, it brings us into a quiet interior space, possibly the artist’s studio, from which we look out onto a soft-edged, nearly abstract scene: blowing and blanketing snow, evergreens and whirling dead leaves, and a long, ghostly barge, motionless upon the icy water. Forrestall has made his picture in the shape of an eye, or one-half of a pair of glasses, or a rear-view mirror. We, no less than the artist, are adrift in time, looking outward, backward, and inward.

As a painter, Forrestall is as deeply interested in *how* we see as in *what* we see. He knows that as viewers, each of us brings to works of art both our conscious skills and ideas and our own range of subjective experience, of which we are only partly aware. Sometimes in approaching contemporary works of realism, we are tempted to puzzle out specific narratives or to read finite symbolic meanings into objects. Such calculated exercises in interpretation will always lead us astray. Paintings such as Forrestall’s elude interpretation. They are not containers for meaning. Their truth resides in their stillness and in their ability to inspire stillness in us.

Dr. Eva Seidner, 2016

Eva Seidner is a writer, lecturer, and collector with a doctorate in English Literature and a wide range of collecting interests spanning the late nineteenth century to the present. Areas of special interest include contemporary painting, Symbolist objects and design of the early twentieth century, and sculptures of the International Studio Glass movement. For Mira Godard Gallery she has written the catalogue essays for *The Self-Portrait Show* (2012) and *Artist and Model* (2015).

Dr. Seidner is currently at work on a collection of short stories. She and her family live in Toronto and Salt Spring Island, B.C.

## Images

**Two Trees**

2016

acrylic on board

36 inch diameter





**Schoolhouse**

June 2015

acrylic on board

9 x 34 inches





The Lake (Detail)

**The Lake**

June, July 2014

egg tempera on board

32 1/2 x 45 1/2 inches







**Island From the Point**

2016

watercolour on paper

15 x 22 inches



**Island**  
2016  
egg tempera on board  
15 1/8 x 42 3/4 inches

**Horizon**

2014-2015

acrylic on board

22 x 46 inches



**Finder's Gaze**

2014-2015

acrylic on board

32 x 45 1/2 inches



**November Landing**  
November 2011  
egg tempera on board  
20 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches







**An Early Blizzard**

2014-2015

acrylic on board

12 x 26 1/2 inches



**Down Through the Woods to a Frozen Lake**

March, April 2010

egg tempera on board

24 x 48 inches



**Hunter Watching**

2015

acrylic on board

20 x 16 inches



**Cheuters Brook Camp**

21 August 2007

watercolour on paper

15 x 22 1/2 inches





**The Lake**

Summer 2015

egg tempera on board

14 5/8 x 26 3/4 inches



**Open Winter**

Winter 2014

egg tempera on board

21 1/4 x 46 inches

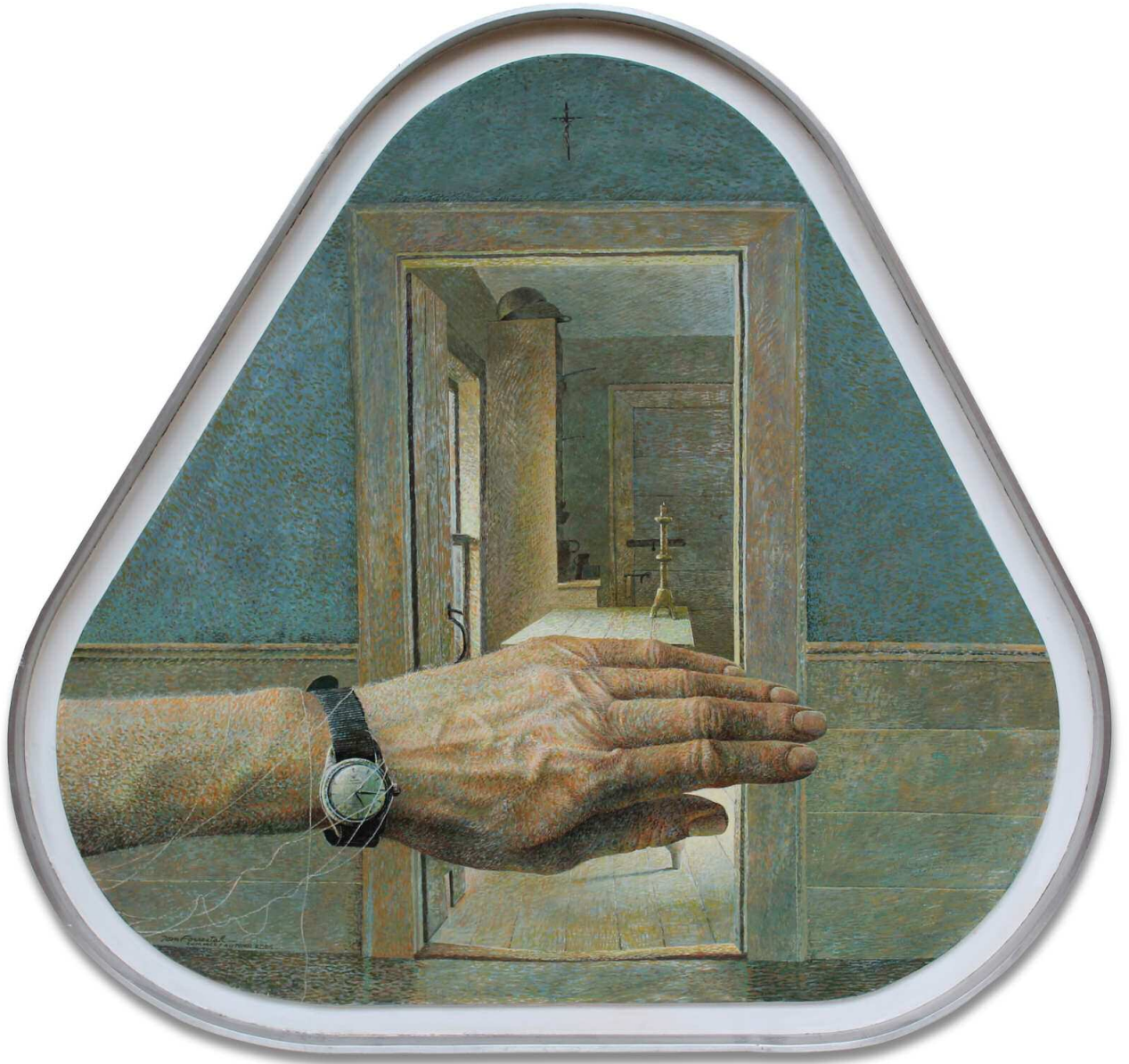


**The Dinner Hour**

Summer/Autumn 2006

egg tempera on board

28 1/2 x 30 1/4 inches



**Barrier at Distant Lake**

May, June 2014

egg tempera on board

21 3/4 x 47 inches







**The Visitor**

2011

acrylic on board

17 x 48 inches

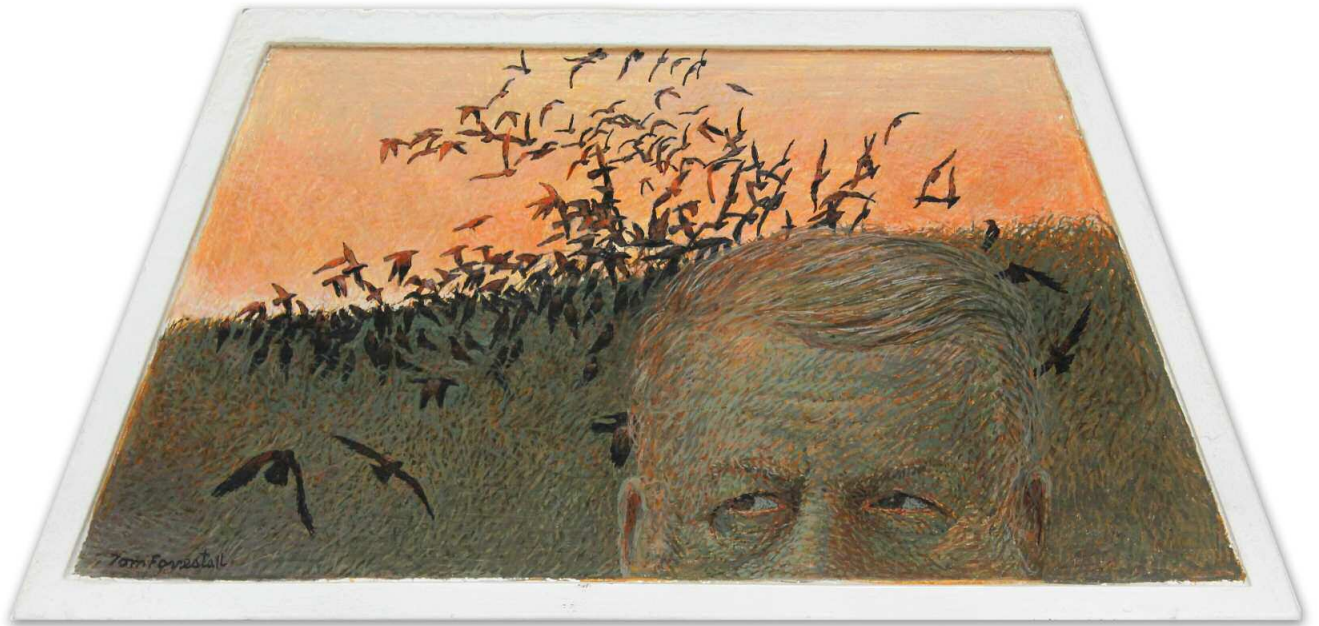


**The Flock**

February 2011

egg tempera on board

5 x 11 1/4 inches



**A Rude Entrance**

2000

egg tempera on board

17 x 25 3/4 inches



**Three Peonies That Were There**

Summer 2010

watercolour on paper

22 1/2 x 15 inches





Tom Forrestall  
SUMMER, 2010.

THREE THAT WERE THERE  
THREE PEONIES

**On the Lighthouse Road**

September 2015

watercolour on paper

15 x 22 inches



**Distant Cape Split**  
September 2015  
watercolour on paper  
15 x 22 inches



"DISTANT CAPE SPLIT."  
FROM PARKSBORO BEACH. - SEPT.  
"I MUST TELL YOU OF THE WOMAN I MET TODAY. VERY STRANGE."

Tom Forrestall WITH MARY.  
PARKSBORO.

**Near Partridge Island**

September 2015

watercolour on paper

15 x 22 inches



DARRSBORO N.S.

Tom Forrestall  
WITH MARY, NEAR PARTLEE ISLAND, SEPT. 2015.

**Moon At Dawn**

Spring 1995

egg tempera on board

32 x 28 inches





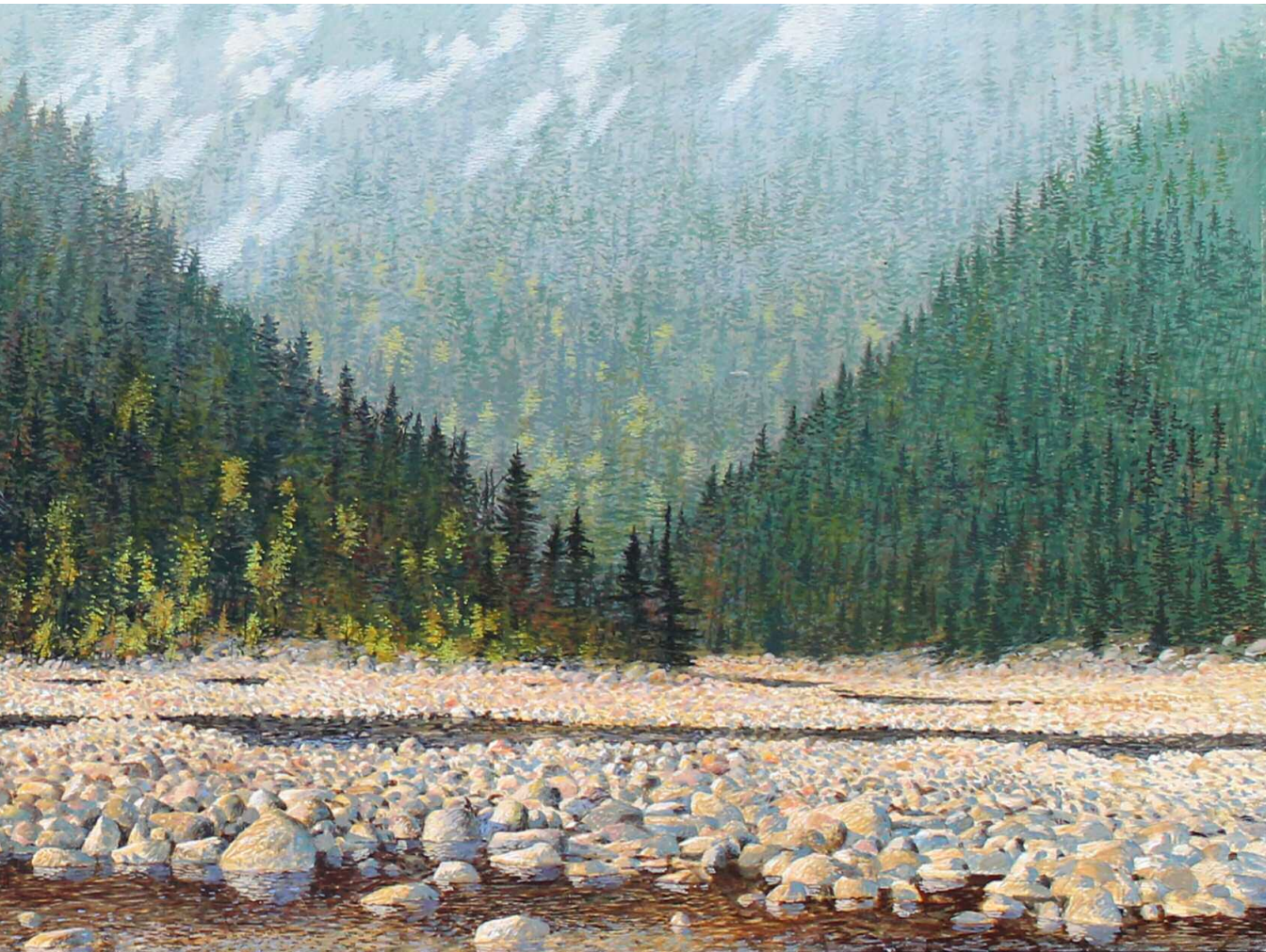


**Painter at Tide Head**

April 2005

egg tempera on board

18 x 48 inches



# List of works

A Rude Entrance 2000 egg tempera on board 17 x 25 3/4 inches	Page 45	Horizon 2014-2015 acrylic on board 22 x 46 inches	Page 19
An Early Blizzard 2014-2015 acrylic on board 12 x 26 1/2 inches	Page 25	Hunter Watching 2015 acrylic on board 20 x 16 inches	Page 29
Barrier at Distant Lake 2014 egg tempera on board 21 3/4 x 47 inches	Page 39	Island 2016 egg tempera on board 15 1/8 x 42 3/4 inches	Page 17
Cheuters Brook Camp 2007 watercolour on paper 15 x 22 1/2 inches	Page 31	Island From the Point 2016 watercolour on paper 15 x 22 1/2 inches	Page 16
Distant Cape Split 2015 watercolour on paper 15 x 22 inches	Page 51	Moon At Dawn 1995 egg tempera on board 32 x 28 inches	Page 55
Down Through the Woods to a Frozen Lake 2010 acrylic on board 24 x 48 inches	Page 27	Near Partridge Island 2015 watercolour on paper 15 x 22 inches	Page 53
Finder's Gaze 2014-2015 acrylic on board 32 x 45 1/2 inches	Page 21	November Landing 2011 egg tempera on board 20 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches	Page 23

On the Lighthouse Road 2015 watercolour on paper 15 x 22 inches	Page 49	The Lake 2014 egg tempera on board 32 1/2 x 45 1/2 inches	Page 15
Open Winter 2014 egg tempera on board 21 1/4 x 46 inches	Page 35	The Visitor 2011 acrylic on board 17 x 48 inches	Page 41
Painter at Tide Head 2005 egg tempera on board 18 x 48 inches	Page 57	Three Peonies That Were There 2010 watercolour on paper 22 1/2 x 15 inches	Page 47
Schoolhouse 2015 acrylic on board 9 x 34 inches	Page 13	Two Trees 2016 acrylic on board 36 inch diameter	Page 11
The Dinner Hour 2006 egg tempera on board 28 1/2 x 30 1/4 inches	Page 37		
The Flock 2011 egg tempera on board 5 x 11 1/4 inches	Page 43		
The Lake 2015 egg tempera on board 14 5/8 x 26 3/4 inches	Page 33		

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"SPRING THAW" EGG TEMPERA, MARCH, APRIL,  
ITING AND BUILDING IN MY MIND'S 'EYE A VISION  
ED (SO TO SPEAK) WITH A FEW DRAWINGS AND A BIG VIS  
MPLE / COMPLEX PAINTING. I CHOOSE TO DO, SO M  
ER TO CONTINUE THE CREATIVE PROCESS AND TO S  
AND LIMBS. TO WITNESS THE BARRIER BETWEEN  
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NG SO CLOSE FOR SO LONG, BECOMING TO  
IE REAL PLACE IS OF NO IMPORTANCE AS TH  
LA I AM, THERE IS A FADING AWAY OF THE REAL LO  
EGG TEMPERA, AND HOW I USE IT WITH ITS MESH  
ECT FOR THIS COMPLEX OF BUSHES, LIMBS G  
RUSH STROKE. NO HUMANS, BIRDS OR ANIMALS  
ACROSS THE LAKE AND BEYOND. A FIGURE WOULD H  
REST TO A BACKDROP. THIS AWAY, IT HAS THE WHOLE  
E, NOT TOO MUCH INFORMATION. IMAGINATION MUST  
OFFER. THANK GOD IT DOES NOT LOOK LIKE A PHOTO  
E BRUSH, THE RESULT IS A PAINTING BY ME. EGG TEMPER  
S AFTER IT IS FINISHED IT LOOKS BETTER. I'VE USED  
TECHNIQUE, RIGHT AWAY, WHATEVER IT WAS CAU  
ME DOWN. THIS SITE, NEAR MY HOME, I'VE VIS  
AYS SEEING IT ANEW. I'M A GREAT ADVOCATE  
NOT SEEN BEFORE. AS BLAKE PUT IT SO WELL "...  
... OUR LIVES ARE FULL OF RESTRICTIONS, MY GREATEST AND  
ON OF THE VISION OR TO COME EVEN...



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