

Getting Under the Skin

PENDER PAINTER
BARBRA EDWARDS
EXPLORES THE RAINFOREST

By CHERIE THIESSEN

Photos of artist by John Bagshaw;
artwork image photos by John Cameron

Not only can Pender artist Barbra Edwards see the forest for the trees, she can lead the viewer there as well with remarkably few strokes.

When I visited her in early August, the Winnipeg-born artist was hard at work on paintings for her series called *In The Skin of the Forest* for the Salt Spring Arts Council's final ArtCraft Showcase exhibition of the summer 2011 season.

No need to step outside for inspiration — the forest crowded close outside, revealing itself generously through the studio's many long windows.

Although she spent most of her adult life in Ontario and had her own gallery in Toronto, another passion surfaced when she and partner Jim Burrows travelled to Long Beach and Tofino after visiting family on Salt Spring Island. Once she had immersed herself under the rainforest's dripping canopy and stood among the giants, she never wanted to leave.

"Touching those huge moss-covered trees and gazing at a 'mother tree' feeding gorgeous ferns and other plants growing hundreds of feet in the air was breath-taking." The theme of the forest and its wisdom has been central to her work ever since.

Soon after, the search for a new home began. While Salt Spring had been their first choice, Edwards and Burrows could not find what they were looking for there, and widened their hunt to include Pender Island. Blame the orcas, the hummingbirds and the eagles they saw on that first





From top: Barbra Edwards with paintings on her forested property, including Big Yellow Taxi situated behind and to her right; Every Summer Night, oil on canvas, 43" X 38". Next page: Woodflight (in the dream of a lichen), oil on canvas, 38" X 43". Previous page: Barbra in her Pender Island studio.

visit. Or blame the 2,200-sq.-ft. home crouched on a sandstone cliff up with the eagles, at the end of a country lane winding through 10 acres of sylvan landscape. They had found home.

That was six years ago, but Edwards' love affair with the forest has only deepened. You can see the ardour in the canvases around her.

"Nature calms us, balances us. It's crucial to our well-being. Artists have always had an affinity with nature. I sense that it is not just a case of living in and around nature but something that is deeply encoded in each human being. The artist is simply excavating her soul to find what has been there for centuries."

She points to one large canvas, named for that insightful singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell, Big Yellow Taxi. Remember that one? They paved paradise to put up a parking lot. She's concerned that humanity will soon destroy all of the rainforest, that nature's sanctuary will soon be razed by greed. These days there's a name for that paucity — nature deficit disorder.

Edwards is an artist in love with colour.

"This year it's pink," she tells me, while we sip delicious Genmaicha, and Erik Satie's hypnotic compositions lull in the background. Interestingly enough, his work was considered a precursor to a later artistic movement called minimalism, and I recall what the impressionist artist in front of me has written on her pithy website:

"Often, unconscious reminders of human or animal presence may appear . . . with just a wisp of a brushstroke. To paint minimally is brave to me; you're way out there where most people aren't comfortable going.

"There is a fluency of drawing that naturally melds into the painting."

BARBRA EDWARDS

For the viewer, often the meaning is unavailable, which allows them to experience the piece individually and to draw their own conclusions.”

But back to pink. I see it in some of the forest floor cover, splashed on a leaf and sometimes just there — like a small creature.

“Half of my ritual is mixing the paints,” she tells me. “I need to be happy with a colour palette before I start.” And the palette does look sumptuous, earthy and lush together as it awaits her brushes, alongside tubes of oil paints jostling to be next to spill their glossy, vivid contents.

“I’ve been having a love affair with oils for years. Oil paint has a life of its own. Leave a painting at the end of the day and things happen while you aren’t there. The colours become richer, the textures seem deeper. Paint drips communicate rainforest, moss, lichen. I sometimes use a dry brush technique and scumble the paint, in keeping with the textures of bark and lichen. It can give a delicious ‘chewy’ texture to a piece.”

Edwards’ background in photography and design (Ryerson University, Toronto) has clearly stood her in good stead. The camera still goes with her everywhere, alongside her sketchbooks. When she begins work, it’s almost always from a sketch.

“Often, the first step is to document with my camera, although I don’t want high realism in my finished work. When I begin a painting, it is almost always from a sketch. There is a fluency of drawing that naturally melds into the painting. The drawing feeds the idea of the painting, which rarely ends up looking like the original. For this show, I’ve gone into the forest’s understory for the first time.”

This artist’s work has been shown in numerous national exhibitions, but the one that resonated with her most was her involvement in Dufferin County Museum’s Water Project in 2003. “It was fabulous to be a part of. Artists across the province wanted to make



a statement about how precious water is and draw attention to our use/misuse of it.”

“The simplicity of a few words and their ability to tell an entire story is beautiful. A good painting or photograph can do the same.”

“Paintings have a life of their own,” she adds. “They reach out and grab you and take you for a ride.”

Those who saw her work at ArtCraft this summer will have enjoyed the journey.

See her website at www.barbraedwards.com for more information and notice of future exhibitions. ✨

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