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Paulette Melanson – Her Paintings Are All About Optimism

I am a landscape and abstract painter working in acrylic, watercolour and mixed media. I get inspiration from my Acadian background and my surroundings in St Margaret's Bay & the South Shore of Nova Scotia. Here is how I found my place in the visual art world.

Biography

I grew up in Scoudouc, a small Acadian village located between Moncton and Shediac, New Brunswick. We spoke French at home and I went to a French school. My parents made us listen to English TV because, in their minds, this would help their children learn to speak English which would provide better opportunities for the future.

I was born the oldest of four children to Leonard Melanson from Scoudouc and Adrienne Allain from Richibuctou Village, NB. My father was a Second World War veteran who was wounded on two occasions. As you can imagine, a lot of issues such as PTSD and addiction came along with my father's service to his country. He was 28 and my mother was 19 when they married. My father was a trained carpenter (plenty of work in the warm months, pogy in the winter). My mother was a seamstress and jack of all trades, it seemed. Everyone in our community had a garden so canning, salting and freezing were big time activities in the fall. Trapping and hunting also supplemented the diet.

Here is a photo of my parents in 1953 (the year I was born).



My father came from a family of thirteen children. His father was a fairly successful contractor and businessman and his mother had been a school teacher. My mother's father was a fisherman and her mother took in boarders to help support the family of seven children. We lived in an apartment my father built in one section of the house my grandfather built for his ever growing family that had now mostly moved out. So I grew up next door to my grandparents and many Melanson relatives with uncles, aunts, cousins living nearby. Our house was located near the forest. There was a path to the camp located on the Scoudouc River, actually more of a stream. As kids we spent many summer days hiking in the woods or fishing for trout near the camp with our homemade fishing rods. We packed a lunch and headed out for the day. No one worried about us.

I went to school in a two room school until grade 6 with three grades per class. We must have had great teachers because it didn't seem to have had any impact on whether I could read, write or do math when I moved up to the consolidated school in grade 7.

My experiences as a child had a tremendous influence on my imagination, my ability to create and what I create to this day. My parents seemed to have as wide an imagination as I did (or went along with it). I loved to draw and paint and they encouraged it! My father was an artist who used wood as his medium and my mother's sister Dorine was an oil painter who still paints every day. We had two oil paintings hanging on our walls. One was impressionistic, the other realism. Ever since I can remember, they totally fascinated me. I wondered how the artist could do these effects. As hard as I tried I couldn't do it.

In my senior high school years I took art as a subject. My teacher, Antoinette Poirier, had a Ph.D. in Fine Arts. She taught us about the Impressionists, Picasso, abstract art and many other artistic styles and influences like the architect known as Le Corbusier.

In grade 12, I had the opportunity to visit the Beaverbrook Gallery in Fredericton and I totally fell in love with Salvador Dali's 'Santiago El Grande' which seemed gigantic. That was a turning point for me. After that I knew for sure that I wanted to be an artist. At the end of my final high school year a group of art students were invited to show their works at the opening of a federal office in Bouctouche NB. I showed two paintings. One was 24" x 36", a mix of abstract and surrealistic styles. To my surprise it sold for \$50, a huge amount for 1971. A journalist did a feature on me for the French daily L'Évangéline. I still have a copy of the article and I am surprised at how mature my thinking was at that early age.

After high school, the practical side of me decided to follow my friends and do a Bachelor of Science (my second favorite subject in school) at the Université de Moncton. My thinking was that I could do the art on the side and I would eventually be able to find work that would support my passion. I supported myself by working in restaurants, factories and clothing stores and graduated in 1975 with a B. Sc. with a specialization in biology.

I moved to Fredericton in 1975 with my boyfriend, to my mother's chagrin, and found work as a substitute teacher at Stanley High School replacing someone on a long term sick leave. Since I had no Education background, I was provided with a local license and began teaching: environmental science, biology, math, art and gym to grades 9 and 10. On top of everything, I had to prepare special work for three students who couldn't follow the regular grade 9 curriculum. Daily I corrected assignments & tests

and prepped for the next day until 11pm each evening. To this day I have the highest respect for good teachers. I was asked to stay for the next year 1976-1977. Instead I decided I had better get a B.Ed. which I did the year after at UNB. I worked part time while doing my B.Ed. and graduated in 1977.

In 1978 I followed my boyfriend to Bathurst, NB where I worked as a project manager for the NB Federation of Agriculture. When my boyfriend and I broke up I decided it would be interesting to sell real estate for Century 21. I successfully did this for the next three years before finally landing a permanent position with the NB Alcoholism and Drug Dependency Commission as a program developer for alcoholic women. This last job combined with University level psychology and counselling courses opened the door for a position with Health Canada in Halifax. My new boyfriend and I packed up and moved to Halifax. This was my big break! He decided to do an MBA at St Mary's University. We got married and bought a home. For reasons I will not go into the marriage did not last. In the meantime, my job was still not in my field but it was something that brought me to the big city where I had always wanted to live. They had an art school and art galleries!!! I had read biographies and how-to books and experimented with paint, charcoal and coloured pencils since I had graduated from high school but I was longing to take formal art training and yearned to be in a class with similarly minded people. My work involved a lot of travelling so I tried to follow Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Continuing Education classes whenever I could. I took all the painting and drawing classes I could fit in and at the same time I worked part-time on a Master's degree in Adult Education (with a counselling specialization). I think I was the happiest person in the world when I finally graduated with my M.Ed.! Keeping busy and my art work kept me sane during some rough periods.

Art Education and Influences

The move to Halifax got me closer to the art world that I so admired, and the move to Nova Scotia also brought me closer to my Acadian Heritage where I was able to visit historic sites that made me question where I came from and why I had barely learned anything about it in school or at home.

At NSCAD some of my continuing education professors included: Michael Fernandes, Nancy Stevens, Sheila Provazza, Susan Patterson, Barbara McLean and Terry Smith-Lamothe. All had something different to offer and I learned from each and every one of them. Michael had great metaphors in his explanations about the process of creating art; that it wasn't where you wanted to go that was important but how you got there. In other words, you may find some pleasant surprises in the creative journey (process) that warrant stopping and assessing whether you have attained your goal earlier than planned and perhaps created a pleasant surprise. Nancy Stevens, besides being a great painter and teacher, became a role model. She demonstrated to me that it was important to have a private space to create and it was possible to have a career as a visual artist. In the late 80's, at her invitation, I visited her studio in downtown Halifax, painting in hand ready for critique. I knew right then and there that I wanted to be making art full time and it was up to me to make it happen!

While in Halifax I also worked for Michelin Tires as an EAP counsellor (same type of work as I was doing for Health Canada in the counselling field). In this period I went through a very short lived marriage that made me realize that I needed to step back and assess my choices. During this period I happily worked at the Michelin job for 6 years until the company decided to contract out the service. I then decided to

open a private practice and delivered EAP and conflict resolution services to Michelin Tire plant employees, Health Canada employees and a host of other federal departments and private companies. I made one last career move by winning a competition to work at Parks Canada delivering conflict resolution services which I did for the next 12 years in the Atlantic provinces and across Canada. A bonus was working in many National Parks and Historic Sites. Then in 1998, while I was at work, I met my current husband, Mike Murphy (his wife had sadly passed away). He remembered me from UNB in 1976. We fell in love, married and have been together ever since. He is my best friend.

Over the years, during all these varied and assorted jobs I always packed paints and paper in my suitcase. In the evenings after my meal and walk, I could barely wait to do a little painting even if I only had 20 minutes to do it. It helped take my mind off the problems I heard all day long during mediations.

Besides extension courses taken at NSCAD, over the years I have taken workshops or done painting studio sessions from/with great artists: Brian Atyeo, Leya Evelyn, David Walker, Linda Kempt, Jean Pederson, Robert Burrige, Mike Svob, Harold Klunder, Wayne Boucher, Barbara McLean and many other artists that I respect and wanted to learn from. I was lucky to find teachers who were more than willing to share tips, technical information as well as their own stories about becoming a professional artist.

As an artist, I think knowledge, creativity and professionalism are key. I want to learn everything I can about the materials I use, how they work and best practices. Books have also been some of my best tools and friends. I have read many art books cover to cover (the latest was: Alla Prima by Richard Schmid). Each of these came to my attention at different periods of my career development and I appreciated every morsel of information provided by these books as well as my teachers. Exploration and experimentation have been important, but most of all painting every day has been the best way to learn. It has been fun and continues to be a humbling challenge. Every time I think I have figured something out, I am reminded how tricky the paint is. To be honest, my life would be over if I could not paint.

The journey to become an artist

I have had a full career working at a variety of different professions that supplied the necessary funds to let me paint on the side and to finally let me paint full time. Why did I not go to art school right off the bat when I graduated from high school? Why did I take this convoluted journey to finally practice my passion?

To be honest, when I graduated from high school, I was looking for stability and a way to be financially independent. I did not want a life in Scoudouc or the life of my parents. I did not think I would be able to have an independent life as an artist because I had read enough to know how difficult it had been for many artists even the successful ones. I would need to repay what I had borrowed for my University education. In spite of this, in the back of my mind, I always entertained the idea of becoming a full time artist whenever finances permitted. It would just take longer than expected.

Once I realized that I was getting closer to my goal, I went into full gear and have not looked back. I believe I have more to offer as an artist now than earlier in my life simply because I have lived life to the

fullest, built a tough skin, have more confidence, developed good working habits and am determined to create and express what the artist in me wants to say or interpret.

Being an artist has been a continuous learning process where I have gotten back what I have put into it and more. I have learned that dependability and professionalism are as important in the art world as in any other profession. Organisations such as Visual Arts Nova Scotia and CARFAC (Canadian Artists' Representation/Le front des artistes canadiens) have provided invaluable sources of information on the business and legal side of things.

I have taken every opportunity possible to view master works in person. This has greatly helped my understanding of colour. My favorites are the Impressionists, the Group of Seven, Van Gogh, the Abstract Expressionists as well as Women of Abstract Expressionism, Painters Eleven (Abstract Expressionism in Canada). I've just come back from a one week gallery tour in New York City where I spent hours in MoMA, the MET, the Whitney, the Guggenheim and the Museum of Art and Design. There is so much to learn from viewing art works up-close no matter what era, group or style.

I have never tried to imitate any particular style of painting but I have tried many different things for the purpose of learning how materials work and how different artists accomplished certain effects. I like to try many different mediums and once in while I like to do something that helps sharpen my drawing skills. My early works were mainly watercolour, ink, oil pastel and mixed media experiments. Some of the things I produced then I still quite like. And I often find inspiration looking at those old ideas. Now, I paint mainly with acrylics and I still experiment whenever I feel like it.

How did I get myself out there?

At first I joined groups as I had no idea where or how to start. It goes without saying that if you have not built an inventory of art, you have nothing to show or promote. So number one priority, was to paint the things that inspired and were important to me. Then I decided to put myself out there - get a website, follow the Maritime Art List, submit my work to Calls for Submissions - and it spread from there.

At this point, anything I do to enhance or benefit my career as an artist is a pleasure. The painting and creating part are the most fun and interesting, but a close second is hearing people's reaction to the art, especially the abstract pieces. Here is an example that inspired – two boys came to my show at Afterglow (Bridgewater's Nocturne) and stayed a good hour finding different images/things in my abstract pieces (without any adult prompting). Art is in the eyes of the beholder. It can be fun, entertaining as well as educational if the opportunity is given to have an experience. They reminded me of how I reacted to art at that age and still do!

Finally all this to explain that:

My art work is about the force of nature, the fragility of life and the connection of all things. Love of nature and love of art have been my life long companions getting me through good times and hard times.

My passion is unconsciously experimenting with paint and finding meaning in the resulting layers; the unconscious painting being my guide to what the painting wants to be. All my abstract works are produced that way. My landscapes, on the other hand, are carefully planned to evoke a mood or a particular feeling that I have experienced in my local surroundings, places I have visited in the past or, subjects that have special meaning to me.

My paintings are about optimism!



'Playful Fish' 2012 (left) 2012 symbolizes my grandfather (Edgar Allain)'s work. He was a fisherman. It is also symbolic of the stories we heard from him as we were growing up. We never quite knew whether to believe him or not and, they were always funny.

'Colourful Bird' 2012 (right), symbolizes family Sunday drives to my grandparents or to my mother's favorite places: Magnetic Hill, The Rocks and Fundy National Park. I remember being fascinated by peacock feathers at a zoo we would often visit.



Both 'In the Pasture' (left) 2013 and 'I Think It's Fish' (right) 2013, symbolize the influence of my Melanson grandparents (who lived next door and also great story tellers – especially my grandmother) and my Allain grandparents (one hour drive away). Our home was located in the countryside where we had both forest and farming while surrounded by aunts, uncles and cousins next door and across the road. Never a dull moment.



I began to paint more seriously after moving to Boutilier's Point in 2000. This is where my studio is now located. Here are two local icons that do not exist anymore. The Old Fish Plant in Hubbards and the Old Shed in Boutilier's Point.



In the early 70's I visited the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. Salvador Dali's 'Santiago El Grande' (which is 13 feet high) left a permanent imprint in my mind. I now think that my painting style was influenced by this piece. I never pre-plan my abstract paintings. The results are as much a surprise to me as anyone else. They usually end up having some sort of influence based on my past experiences or a childhood memory 'Delight' (left) reminds of the images in a story book that my godmother gave me when I was a pre-schooler. She is also an artist. 'Heart of the Tree' (right) is influenced by my second cousin who lived next door. According to her, all trees had hearts and if you looked close enough, you could find it.



'Together, Peggy's Cove' and 'Parlee Beach, NB' were painted in 2014. When I paint landscapes, I know what the subject will be and how I would like to depict the mood, but I can never predict the outcome. That is what creating art is all about to me; the element of surprise (not knowing when it will be finished and what it will look like). Mind you, it can be frustrating when there are deadlines!



'Grand Pré Apple Blossoms', acrylic and paper collage on canvas and 'Northwest Cove', acrylic on canvas'; both are places near and dear to me.



'Fall in St Margaret's Bay' and 'Who's There?, Grand Pré'



'St Margaret's Bay' 2015 (left) and 'On Break' 2015 (right)



'Joy of Living' 2015 (left) and 'Swirl' 2014 (right)



'Salty Friends' 2016 (left) and 'While at the Park' 2016 (right)



'Exciting News' 2016 (left) and 'Life Course' 2016 (right)



'Cocoon' 2016 (left) and 'Untitled 5' 2016 (right)

Paulette Melanson
paulettmelanson@eastlink.ca
paulettmelansonartist.com

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Q and A

BID: When you prepare to paint, is there anything you do special to get ready?

Paulette: Before I begin I find it absolutely necessary to address the things that need my immediate attention such as emails. It frees my conscious mind and allows both creation and problem solving to flow freely. I like the convenience of having my studio in the house because new discoveries and painting ideas pop in my head all the time and sometimes a quick sketch or mini painting is better than making a note. I am known for being a night hawk. The quietness of the night seems to put me in some kind of trance where tiredness ceases to exist and ideas and creativity explode. When I get stuck on a difficult problem in my painting I find it most helpful to go for a brisk or slow walk outdoors or on the tread mill (located in my studio).

BID: What's the best advice you were ever given regarding your career?

Paulette: Being able to accept rejection as a door opening rather than a door closing has been the most useful advice I've picked up over the years. Also, paint, paint, paint. Being good at something requires a lot of hard work. Create art that expresses who you are; create with integrity. Inspiration comes from life experience. Never stop believing in who you are and never give up on yourself. Making mistakes is part of the learning process.

BID: If you were given the opportunity to paint alongside any artist (living or dead), who would you choose and why?

Paulette: A living artist I would like to paint with is French painter Jean Claude Roy who paints in France and Newfoundland. He only paints plein-air, uses thick brush strokes like Van Gogh and has some of the most expressive works I have ever seen. A dead artist I would like to paint with is Claude Monet. 1) I love the light in his paintings and his impressionistic style. I have had the privilege to view some of his art works on a number of occasions. I also visited his house and garden in Giverny. 2) He is a role model; his life reflects all of the qualities and advice that I learned to respect as an artist. 3) He worked hard at his chosen profession and lived to create and paint and did so with great pleasure and creativity until he died.

BID: Do you follow any artist's career in (1) Canada, (2) the USA, (3) Europe?

Paulette: Yes, many. They are artists that I have either met, have read about, read their books or studied under.

1) Current Canadian artists: Harold Klunder, Brian Atyeo, Leya Evelyn and Wayne Boucher. Past: Painters Eleven, The Group of Seven and Emily Carr.

2) Current American artists: Robert Burrige, Richard Schmid and Edward Betts.

Past: John Marin, the men and women of Abstract Expressionism.

3) Current European artist: Jean Claude Roy and Ray Balkwill.

Past: The Impressionists, Vincent Van Gogh and Joaquin Sorolla

BID: If you could travel and paint in any country outside of your Canada, what country would you choose and why?

Paulette: I would like to travel and paint in France. Because of my Acadian/French heritage, it would be interesting to see what abstract creations would come out. It would be neat to paint in Lascaux where the prehistoric cave paintings are located. I would make Paris my home base and visit Musée d'Orsay, Musée du Louvre and the National Museum of Modern Art at the Centre Pompidou as often as possible. I am also drawn to Pablo Picasso who lived in Paris and explored so many different styles of painting over the course of his life. I would go back to Giverny and visit Monet's home and gardens and if I were permitted, paint there.

BID: What advice would you give to a young artist.

Paulette: Go for it! Beware there are no guarantees. There are no short cuts. Never give up on your dreams. Being successful at any career takes a lot of time, hard work and dedication. Be prepared to work at another job part-time or full time until you can let go of that income and do your art full time. You may have to paint things that sell to make ends meet but never stop nurturing your creative side. Take every opportunity to view and study original art, take courses from many different artists. Read about the lives of artists. Always be curious and learn the technical workings of your medium of choice. For me, being an artist has been a life-long love affair with creating and expressing ideas with a drive to be original.