



Where the Light Comes In

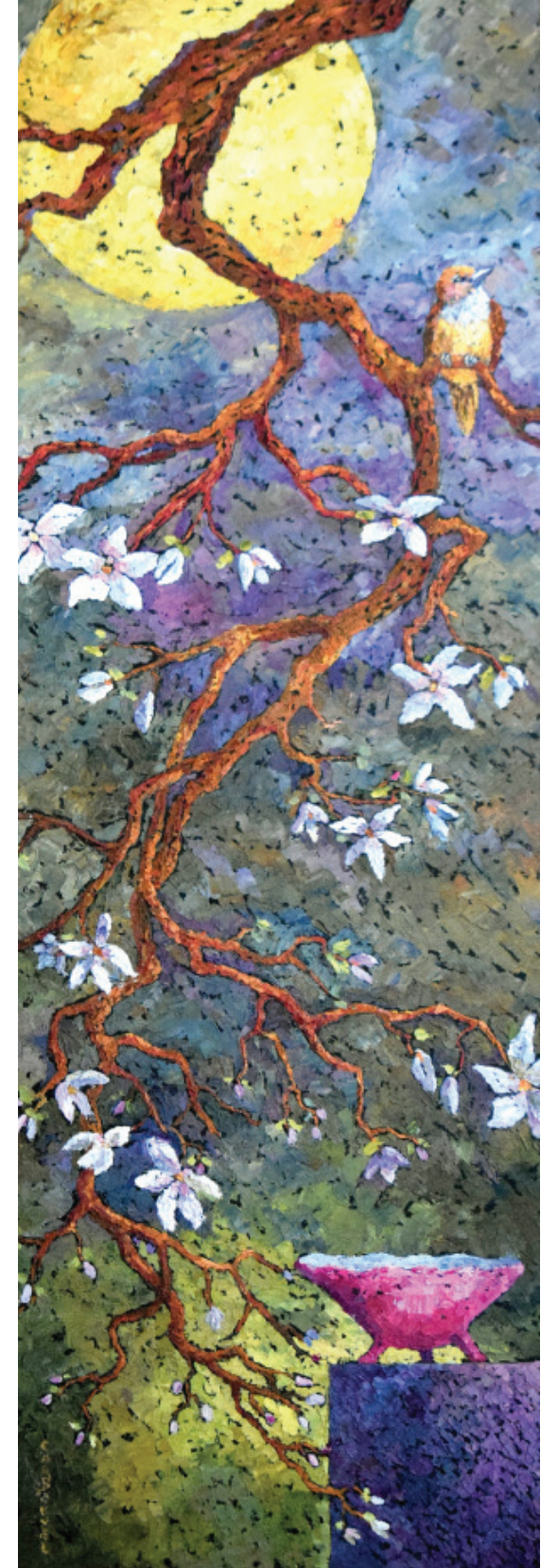
written by Brett Anningson

A Carbonnel painting is immediately recognizable for its mysterious, medieval aura; bright colours merging with darkness to suggest an unfinished quality that belies careful attention to detail. The search for such a style was, for Catherine, something of a quest.

"For years, every time I looked at my work I asked myself: Can someone tell at first glance that this painting is a Carbonnel? And for years the answer was: No. The technique was there, the subject matter was treated correctly and yet I felt it did not look like anything out of the ordinary. I tried and rejected so many things, until one day at an art fair in Aylmer something strange happened."

It was one of those moments when everything changes, but you don't realize it at the time. Catherine put up a canopy, installed her easel and was ready to start painting on a blank canvas. For some reason, she decided to paint the white canvas with black gesso. "I had tried painting on a black canvas before," she admits, "but I did not like the outcome. It took many layers to cover the black, and some colours, especially yellows, looked greenish because of the black undercoat. But that morning I decided to try again. Only, instead of using my brushes, I painted with a spatula."

Catherine had tried and rejected this technique in the past – believing it would get muddy if she overworked the canvas. Still, quickly sketching a sheep barn remembered from the south of France, she began to paint. Not knowing exactly what else she would add, she continued daubing paint here and there, following no guidelines. "From the corner of my eye, I sensed another artist coming from time to time to check the progress of my work," she remembers. "He was an older gentleman in his 70s. At one point, he



left, Munificence, acrylic on panel, 40" x 30"
above, Lunessence, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 12"

came and whispered in my ear: "Put down your spatula, your painting is done and it is beautiful."

I replied with a smile, "But it's not finished. Look, I have not covered all the black spots on the canvas."



1974
1974



previous spread, Relaxel, acrylic on canvas, 30" x 36"

above, Cortège de couleurs, acrylic on canvas, 30" x 36"



Douce douce, acrylic on canvas, 26" x 30"

Again he said: "Your painting is beautiful and it stands on its own the way it is, put down your spatula."

The third time he came around, Catherine was getting annoyed and chose to take a coffee break to avoid being rude. "When I came back, I saw a lot of people in front of my easel, visitors as well as other artists, and I could not see my painting. It was just like in the movies, I made my way towards my booth, breaking through the small crowd, and suddenly I had a revelation when I discovered that my painting was exactly what I was looking for all these years. I had discovered a style! When I returned home, I sent an e-mail to my angel/artist thanking him for having stopped my hand that day. He replied that knowing when to stop working on a painting was the most difficult thing to do. He added that overworking

a canvas simply made the work look "harassed." It was a joke between us each time I saw him in art fairs and exhibitions: Be careful not to harass your painting today!"

The Journey Remembered

Catherine was born in Paris, France and moved with her parents to Montréal when she was eight years old. Camping and fishing were favourite pastimes, and every fair weather weekend Catherine's mother packed up the car and off they would go. Catherine credits this for her love of nature – pick her up and drop her in a forest and she is right at home.

It was her father, an avid photographer, who first inspired her to look artistically at the world. "For my ninth birthday I got a Kodak Instamatic with flash cubes," Catherine recalls. "The joy I

felt! Without knowing it at the time, this was the best training I could get to practice an artistic eye. Since my parents had to pay to get my film developed, I could not simply take pictures by the dozens. Like my father, I had to think and rethink about my subject, observing light and shadow, choosing what I wanted to express before pushing the trigger, hoping I was taking the best photograph I could... and sometimes I did!"

On her 12th birthday, December 25th, she received a watercolour kit, and spent the rest of her Christmas vacation painting. Rather than drawing an image first, she picked up the brush and began to create. The feelings took her away. She was hooked.

Often, life complicates ambition. For Catherine that meant becoming a stay-at-home wife and mother. During her leisure time, she used knitting

and crocheting as an artistic outlet. When the time came to re-enter the workforce, she decided on a career as a realtor. "One weekend, I was on duty in the real estate booth in a shopping center," she recalls, "and there was an arts and crafts show in the mall. I immediately felt a connection with these people and inquired how to be part of an exhibition, as I had discovered in a magazine how to crochet sugar-stiffened bowls and had quite a collection. I quit my job and started showing my crochet work every weekend."

Carrying all those bowls was cumbersome, so Catherine turned her talents to making jewelry. It sold so well that people inquired where they could buy it when the show was over. So Catherine opened a boutique, La Perlière, where for twelve years she designed and created unique pieces of jewelry, and also revived her love affair





previous spread, Requiem, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 30"
left, Rouge et Or, acrylic on panel, 24" x 18"

above, L'Heure du Thé, acrylic on panel, 16" x 16"

with painting – transforming the back room of the boutique into a studio.

"The first painting I was fairly proud of and placed on the wall, simply wanting to look at it from a distance. A lady came in, saw the painting and asked "How much?" My mind went blank... how much? For the painting? I said the first number that popped in my brain, \$28. I thought it was expensive for the orange I was portraying, but I made my first sale! The same thing happened with another customer the week after. Since the painting was bigger, I asked \$50 and it sold. I then decided to do a bit of research to find out an accurate price for my paintings. Not an easy task for a beginner, as you sometimes compare your work to renowned artists, and of course your work does not have the same value. Art fairs are a good way to see where you fit in."

In 1994, Catherine closed her boutique and repaired jewelry from home. She was still painting but, being divorced, she felt she needed to focus more on bread and butter money, which the jewelry repairs provided. The biggest and most devastating change came in 1999, when she lost her son to cancer.

"A few days after he passed," says Catherine, "I found a letter to his grandparents, which he did not have time to send. In this letter, written in the hospital, he told my parents that he wished I would do what I had been saying I would do for years, sell the house and take a sabbatical year to pursue my painting career. A little sentence then followed: Isn't it sad that because of laziness or cowardice, we do not pursue our dreams?"

"Well, I put the letter down, picked up the Yellow Pages to find a real estate agent, and



L'Offrande au Printemps, acrylic on panel, 24" x 48"



above, Radiance, acrylic on panel, 16" x 16"



right, La source, acrylic on panel, 20" x 16"

placed my house on the market. Two months later it sold, and I have been painting ever since. Being self-taught by choice, I nevertheless felt a great desire to explore and better my art. So each month, I bought every local and international art magazine I could find, then stacked them by the hundreds in my apartment!"

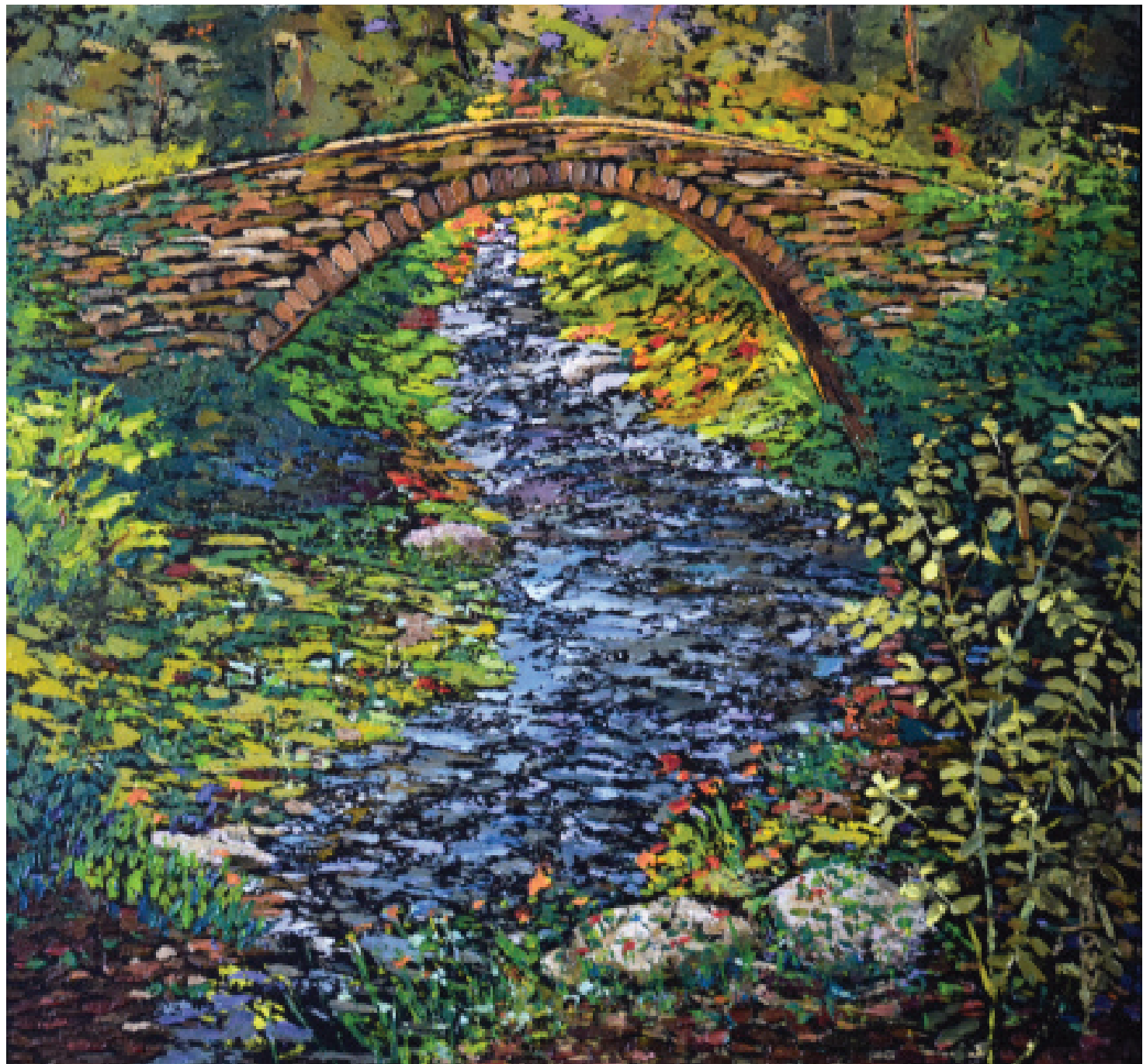
From Experimenting to Fulfillment

In her studio, Catherine experimented with various media and subject matter. She liked soft pastels for the smoothness, the vivid colours and immediacy of application. This was her preferred medium for the next 14 years, until she started doing bigger pieces and found the paintings became too heavy because of the frame and the necessary protective glass. She then turned to acrylics, now her exclusive medium of choice.

"The fact that acrylics dry so quickly was my main attraction to the medium," she explains. "I experimented with most brands until I found one that perfectly suited my needs both for texture and colours."

Van Gogh tops the list of artists Catherine admires. "I must have over 50 books in my library. I like that he did not try to please anyone, just kept putting his vision on canvas with the most honest and dedicated mind. The impressionists appeal to me with their brightly coloured work and, again, the will to pursue a style that did not please everyone. I like strong minded artists like Emily Carr, her work is unique and her spirit was even more so. I try to apply her motto when I paint: Get to the point and keep it simple. This meets with my own sense of expressing myself succinctly, especially in my still lives which I like to





previous spread, Jusqu'à la mer, acrylic on panel, 18" x 24"
left, Orangeus Arbutus, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 24"

above, L'eau vive, acrylic on panel, 16" x 16"

call Silent Lives. Simplicity with a Zen approach."

Catherine has also reduced her palette, feeling liberated with a limited number of colours, usually eight. She works with only one – very small – painting knife, regardless of the canvas size. She uses this tool to spread, scratch or paste the surface, using all sides and angles to produce the desired effect.

Inspiration comes in many shapes, sounds and colours. "My subject matters vary from Silent Lives, to people, to landscapes. Each theme brings its challenges and that keeps me on the

edge to bring these subject matters to life with interesting composition and original ways of presenting them."

View more of Catherine Carbonnel's work at www.carbonnel.ca or contact her at catherinecarbonnel@videotron.ca or 514.992.3529.

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