

Artist to Collect

Christopher Walker





previous spread, Barometer, acrylic on masonite, 24" x 36", private collection
 above, Balance, acrylic on masonite, 24" x 48", private collection
 right, Acceptance, acrylic on masonite, 24" x 40", private collection

The Voice of a Generation

written by Kylie Serebrin

As far back as Christopher Walker can remember, his life has unfolded to the scent of oil paint, the sight of paintbrushes dancing across canvases and the melodies of classical music floating softly in the background.

Christopher's mother, Jean, was a painter and his father, George, an internationally recognized virtuoso singer. Together, the family resided on the West Island of Montreal until Christopher reached the age of 19. As a boy, his mother recognized his aptitude for drawing and painting and encouraged him to enhance his skills. Similarly, Christopher's elementary and secondary school teachers noted his potential, awarding him top honours in fine arts upon graduation. "I vividly remember visiting the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts as a young man of 15," he recalls. "I came upon its collections of works by Renaissance and Surrealist painters and was completely taken aback."

In addition to learning from his mother's painterly example, Christopher notes that his father was an equally significant role model. "My father loved his art and demonstrated for me the courage and dedication to persevere in his profession for nearly 30 years. The standard he set with regards to the passion and tenacity one must possess to succeed as an artist probably made my own career development easier for me than it is for most other artists. I was well prepared for the hard work necessary to make it in the art world."

Finding His Own Direction

Ironically, during these formative years Christopher never expected to make a living painting full time. As a teenager, his interests were diverse. For a time, he intended to pursue a career in science, due to his fascination with the environment. He even considered taking his role as lead guitarist in a local rock band to the professional level. It wasn't until his family moved to a small town near Uxbridge, Ontario that Christopher's ambitions snapped more sharply into focus. Living closer to the wilderness and befriending nearby farmers stimulated his desire to paint and illustrate – so much so, that in 1983 he decided to enrol in Toronto's (then) Ontario College of Art.

While at the O.C.A., Christopher studied under such great artists as Steven Quinlan, Franklin







Transformation, acrylic on masonite, 48" x 44", Royal Collection

Arbuckle, Paul Young, Will Davies, Gerry Sevier and Ian Car Harris. "One of my most memorable experiences relating to my artistic development was painting with Franklin Arbuckle in Claremont, Ontario," Christopher recounts. "Arbuckle, who is very well-known for his dynamic landscapes, taught me how to bring out the essence of a subject and make it look fresh – as if I were seeing it for the first time. I'd go out with him, find a location in the wilderness and we'd paint outdoors from morning until dusk, sometimes in snow and -20 degree temperatures." During this time, Christopher was also introduced to the work and philosophy of Alex Colville and Andrew Wyeth, who helped shape his early artistic direction and voice.

After graduating from the O.C.A, Christopher became art director for Hayes Publishing in Burlington, Ontario, where he designed and illustrated science books. After 2 years trapped in a commercial loop, he challenged himself to break new ground with his artwork. In 1990, he packed up and moved to British Columbia, where the natural environment continually awakens his senses. "My art has hugely benefitted from this place," he states. "Vancouver Island is where I first began to develop a name for myself as a painter and, after 23 years of living here, I am as grateful as ever for this beautiful region and its people."

Hatching a Masterpiece

Christopher's studio is located on Denman Island just off the shores of Vancouver Island, not far from Mount Arrowsmith and Little Qualicum Falls – a sacred place for his creativity and inspiration. The studio is surrounded by an abundance of wildlife, including black bears, cougars, blacktail deer and bald eagles, as well as massive Douglas firs, red cedars and white pines. In many ways, his studio resembles a science lab, filled with artefacts, specimens of birds of prey, microscopes and field glasses. "I even keep my childhood dinosaur models close at hand, as this was one of the subjects that first got me started with drawing," he points out.

Given Christopher's scientific and analytic nature, it comes as no surprise that he paints with a realistic style. Educated by traditionalists, he developed a strong belief that if an artist is first able to achieve a great realistic style, then most



Summer, acrylic on masonite, 26" x 50",
Collection of Rick & Lourdes Dempster

other styles that he or she attempts will have superior depth and dynamics. He cites Picasso as a perfect example.

Christopher's painting technique is best described as a hatching process using glazes – a method that originated among the early Dutch masters. Once he has decided upon a subject and accumulated the necessary observations to formulate a meaningful idea, he creates a series of thumbnails. An accomplished draftsman, Christopher then develops strong line drawings, which are subsequently transferred onto gessoed masonite. Next, he creates a small colour composition, in order to prepare his acrylic mixtures. From there, he begins a loose underpainting and proceeds to apply more opaque layers until he has achieved his desired effect. "I hatch out each area very boldly at first and then, as the subject begins to take shape, I tighten up the hatching process to achieve a more resolved and smoother rendering," Christopher states. Finally, he uses glazes to harmonize hues and values, which adds another dimension of depth to the work.



above, Arctic, acrylic on masonite, 36" x 48",
Collection of Environment Canada

right, Sonar, acrylic on masonite, 48" x 72",
Collection of Department of Fisheries and Oceans

Art with a Message

According to Christopher, art is a platform on which to express his emotional and philosophical viewpoints. The subjects he broaches rarely yield literal depictions, but rather associative metaphors that express an opinion. His paintings' subjects and compositions are affected by everything from current events, politics, culture and his personal life.

For him, the most worthwhile challenge of painting is performing a full analysis of a subject in order to access the core of its essence and existence. By doing so, he is able to assign visceral meaning to his association with a subject and to better understand his connection to it. He notes, "I consider my work to be a form of 'Perceptual Realism,' which goes beyond photographic realism, insofar as it conveys a more personal interpretation adherent to my understanding of a subject's significance."

His advice to painters seeking to explore his craft is to rely less upon reference photographs and more on the mind's eye. "Research your subject matter fully by reading about it, but then familiarize yourself with it by experiencing your subject first hand. The more senses you can stimulate during

your exploration, the better, so as to fully achieve a visceral and meaningful depiction of a subject."

Christopher's sense of cultural responsibility and dedication to creating art that communicates significant social messages has led to his participation in many environmental and philanthropic endeavours. He has been inspired by his good friend and collector of his artwork, Rick Dempster, who has left a strong legacy of contributions to humanitarian organizations serving children and the environment. Christopher's work with groups such as the National Science Foundation, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Environment Canada, Citizens for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and the Victoria Symphony Orchestra has enriched his dedication as an artist. Raising funds for local hospice societies, The Children's Miracle Network and cancer research have also been enormously rewarding – yet nothing has surpassed his experience on the expedition 'Arctic 94.'

'Arctic 94'

Robert Bateman has greatly influenced Christopher's artistic direction, especially with his environmental paintings. "Bob has always been a tremendous example of integrating his artwork

with his passion for the environment and is a true master of depicting the wilderness on panel," says Christopher. "I truly admire his interaction with not only the science of the environment but also the political aspects."

Having a strong scientific approach to nature and an emphasis on the human relationship to the environment garnered Christopher notice by the Institute of Ocean Science on Vancouver Island, which informed him of an upcoming expedition on an icebreaker to the North Pole, scheduled to take place in the summer of 1994. Artists, writers and filmmakers were included to fully document the historic journey. Only after he was accepted to participate did Christopher consider the trials that lay ahead during the 2 month journey. "Previously, the longest time I'd been at sea was taking a BC Ferry from the mainland to Vancouver Island!" he recalls.

Nevertheless, in June 1994, Christopher boarded the Louis S. St. Laurent. Over the course of the expedition, he sketched and photographed various science experiments and events, as well

as the drama of the seemingly endless ice and its inhabitants. Working on an icebreaker was not without its challenges, however. "The crew had prepared a drafting table for me in the crow's nest. It was a 20-foot climb up the mast, and it shook and swayed while we travelled through the ice. The ship would frequently shutter abruptly, transforming a realist effort at fine brush work into moments when it seemed like Jackson Pollock was possessing my hand!" he describes.

Finally reaching the North Pole was an exhilarating experience for Christopher, who remembers taking a long walk on his own across the sea of ice and contemplating the historical significance of the location and his connectedness to it. He was awarded the Commissioner's Commendation medal and the U.S. Arctic Service medal, in addition to being entered into the Canadian Archives for making history as the first Canadian expedition to reach the North Pole by surface vessel.

"In a nutshell, the Arctic 94 experience changed the way I look at the world and my own life," he





above, *Intrusion*, acrylic on masonite, 30" x 40", private collection



right, *Stealth*, acrylic on masonite, 24" x 40", Collection of Rick & Lourdes Dempster

states. "I came to realize that an artist should create a notable contribution to society – a goal which I continue to strive for, after many years of commitment." (The expedition was made into a TV documentary by Gala Film titled "By Icebreaker to the North Pole," which aired on A&E and Discovery Channel networks from 1996 to 1999.)

The Luna Monument

More recently, Christopher's sense of purposeful artistic responsibility led him on the Luna Memorial Cruise. The excursion was designed to honour the memory of Luna – an orca who left Puget Sound in 1999 and stayed in Nootka Sound befriending the locals, until he was tragically killed by a tug boat's propellers in 2006. "In 2004, the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans authorized a plan to capture Luna and return him to his pod, however the Mowachaht Muchalaht First Nations protested and successfully thwarted the orca's capture. They believed Luna to be the reincarnation of their former chief, Ambrose Maquinna," Christopher recounts.

On the memorial cruise, he met Chief Michael Maquinna – Ambrose's son. The pair became good friends and discussed the idea of creating a bronze sculpture monument of Luna to be placed in

Nootka Sound, on Anderson Point. "The project is still being considered, although funding strategies have yet to be implemented by the province of British Columbia," Christopher explains, "but when the time comes to immortalize Luna in sculpture, I will certainly be a strong participant."

The Lancaster Connection

The Lancaster Bomber holds a special place in the Walker family heritage. Christopher's Grandfather, Eric Bawden, was a mechanic who serviced these planes during World War II. Christopher reflects, "I had the honour to fly on the Mynarski Avro Lancaster at the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum in Hamilton, Ontario – a chilling experience that to this day preserves my respect and admiration for those who flew on these planes to protect Canadian sovereignty."

Over 55,000 crewmen died in Bomber Command based in England, over 10,000 were Canadian. 430 Lancaster Bombers were built in Canada at Victory Aircraft in Malton, Ontario. Says Christopher, "A Lancaster crew consisted of seven members. I decided to use the metaphors of a murder of crows and a timeless fence and landscape to emphasize the purpose of this aircraft, which was to defend territory. The rising sun seemed appropriate, as



left, Westward, acrylic on masonite, 24" x 48", private collection

right, Infringement, acrylic on masonite, 28" x 28", private collection



many Lanc sorties were carried out at night and the pilots usually returned home at daybreak. I dedicate this painting to my Grandfather and the many young men who died flying the planes."

Art for Humanity

Exemplifying the global appeal of his work, Christopher's painting "Transformation" was recently accepted into the Royal Collection. It will be on loan to the Canadian Consulate General in Seattle, Washington thanks to Robert Harris and Susan Ruthermund, who presented the painting as a gift to Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II.

The sense of privilege at being a full-time painter and a voice of his generation that radiates from Christopher is at once humble and extraordinary. He states: "Leaving an inspirational outlook and descriptive record of human civilization's relationship to the natural world remains at the core of my initiatives as a painter. In a world so confused regarding effective prioritization with little consideration for the long-term effects of our consumption of fossil fuels and a profound loss of natural habitats, art has never had a more important role as a mirror to society. I like to think that my art is not for the sake of art, but for the sake of humanity and the natural world." We are fortunate to have so fine an artist working on our behalf.

To view more of Christopher's work, visit www.christopherwalkerart.ca, or email christopherwalkerart@gmail.com.

For a gallery, contact:

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