

JOHN OVCACIK



Fun and Whimsical

written by John Ovcacik and Debra Usher

Previous Page, below, **The Optimist 2**, acrylic on canvas, 40" x 40"

This Page, below, **Maybe Not**, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"



Following Page, *Summertime*, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 36"

John Ovcacik Fun and Whimsical

As a young boy growing up in the suburbs of Toronto, I had a fairly typical life – playing miscellaneous sports, hanging out with friends and trying to maintain good grades in school. I also developed an interest in art. Where this came from is a bit of a mystery, as I didn't have any mentors or role models. My parents encouraged this interest, but there wasn't much of a precedent for it in the family. The art program at school was minimal, but I spent much of my spare time drawing, sketching and building models.

Working it Through

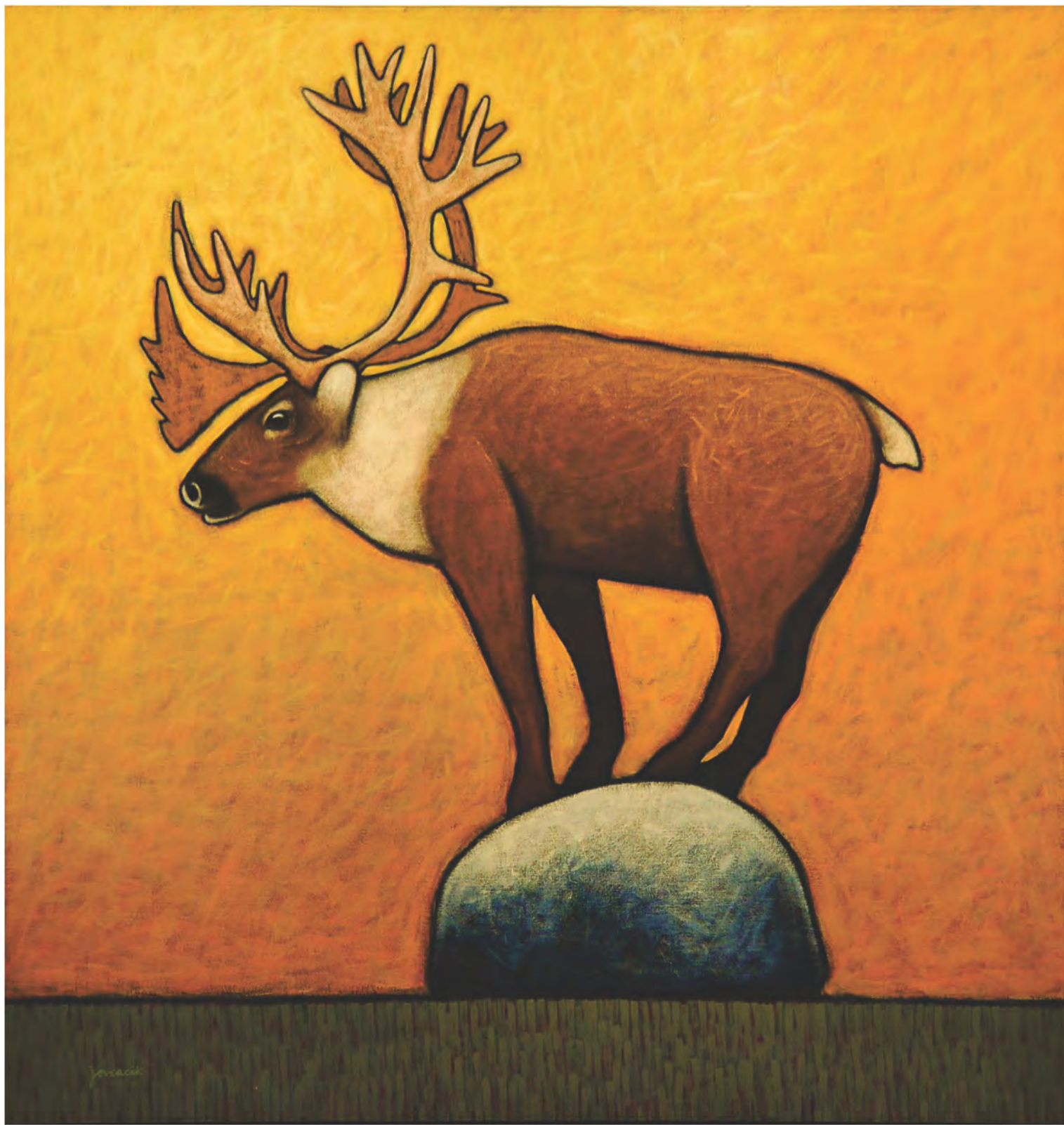
By my late teens, I began painting with watercolours. There was no formal training, just self-taught experimenting. After high school, I began studying architecture at university, and my miscellaneous drawings were part of the portfolio I submitted in my application to the program. During the course of my studies, I was able to incorporate my drawing and painting skills into the studio work, and I very much enjoyed the blending of manual artistic expression with the more technical aspects of architectural theory and design.

After graduating in 1988, I began working in design firms, and continued painting as a serious hobby, spending much of my spare time building up a series of work. It was also around this time, the early 90's, that I began selling my paintings through commercial galleries.

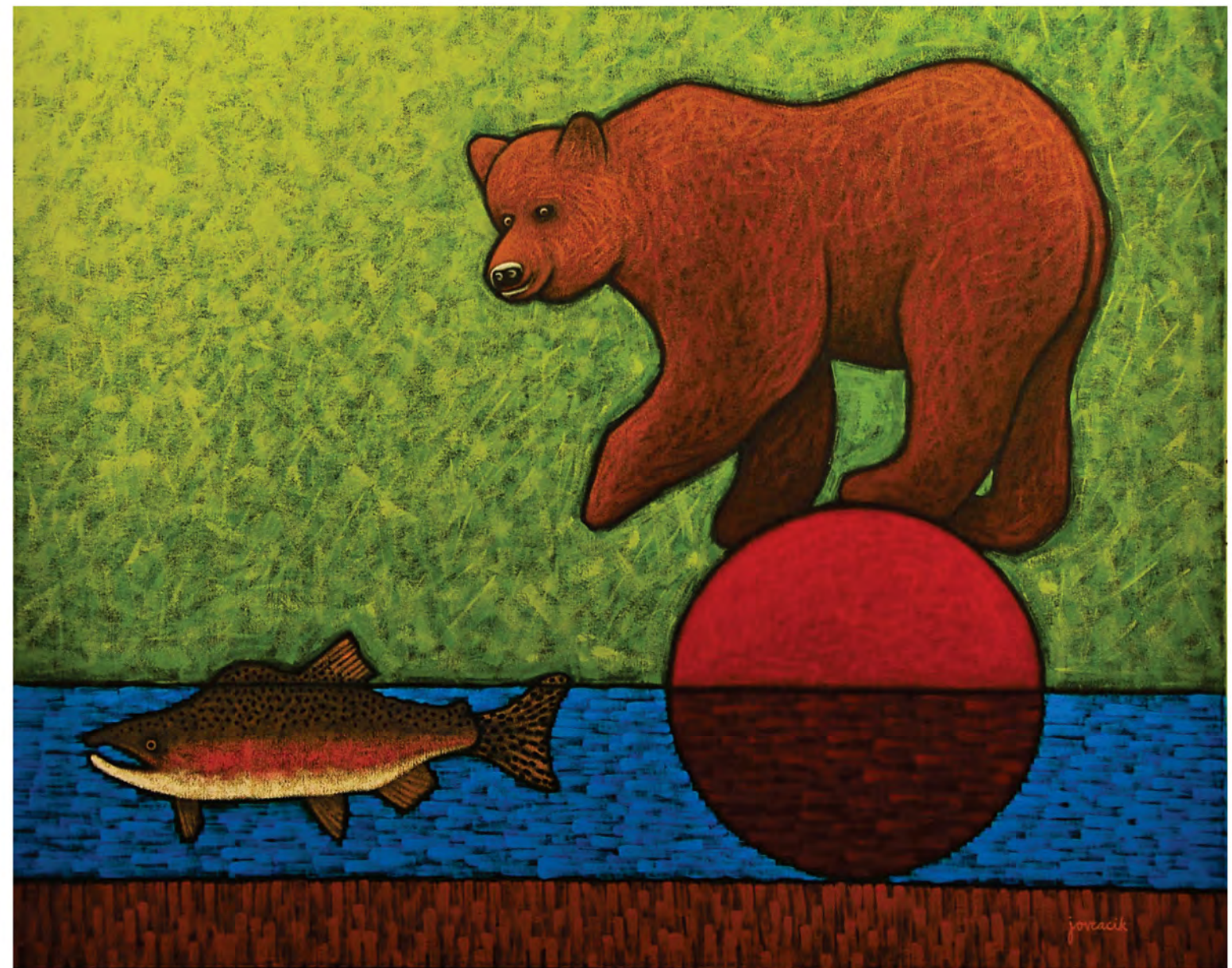
At the time, the work was mostly watercolour, and depicted a range of subject matter in a fairly conventional representational style. The main influences included well-known Canadian artists such as Ken Danby, Alex Colville and Christopher Pratt, Americans Andrew Wyeth and Hubert Shuptrine, and a bit later, a group of artists collectively known as the American Photorealists.

Perhaps as a result of my architectural training, buildings became the main focus of my work. Wanting to work on a larger scale with tight detail and straight lines, I began to sense the limitations of watercolour. So I tried my hand at acrylics, and that eventually became the medium I now use exclusively.





This Page, above, **A Slightly Better View**, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 36"
Following Page, top, **Former Circus Bear**, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 30"
Following Page, bottom, **Confusion at the Put-In**, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 48"



This Page, below, **Seeking Shelter 2**, acrylic on canvas, 30" x 60"
 Following Page, **March Break**, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 36"

A Change in Life and Location

1993 marked a major change in my life. Having married a few years earlier, my wife and I made the decision to relocate from Toronto to Chelsea, Quebec, just north of Ottawa. This was mainly for employment reasons, but it also provided opportunities for outdoor recreation which was becoming a big part of our lives. We are surrounded by nature, with year-round recreation at our doorstep. Wildlife sightings are common, and occasional visitors include deer, bears, and wild turkeys, among others. And yet we are less than 15 minutes from downtown Ottawa.

Shortly after the move, I made the decision to focus on my art full-time. The subject matter and style were trending toward surreal landscapes with simplified rural buildings. Unlike the early work, which depicted actual places and buildings, these images were imagined, fictional places. No doubt inspired by places I had seen, but nonetheless were invented and designed. My signature image became the solitary farmhouse or outbuilding, simplified and stripped of ornament. Typically at sunset or dusk, the buildings would often be animated by a source of artificial light as a contrast to the natural glow of the fading sky. This basic theme formed the core of my work for the next 20 years.





This Page, above, **The Primal Agenda**, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"

Following Page, top, **Nothing to do but Wait**, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 48"

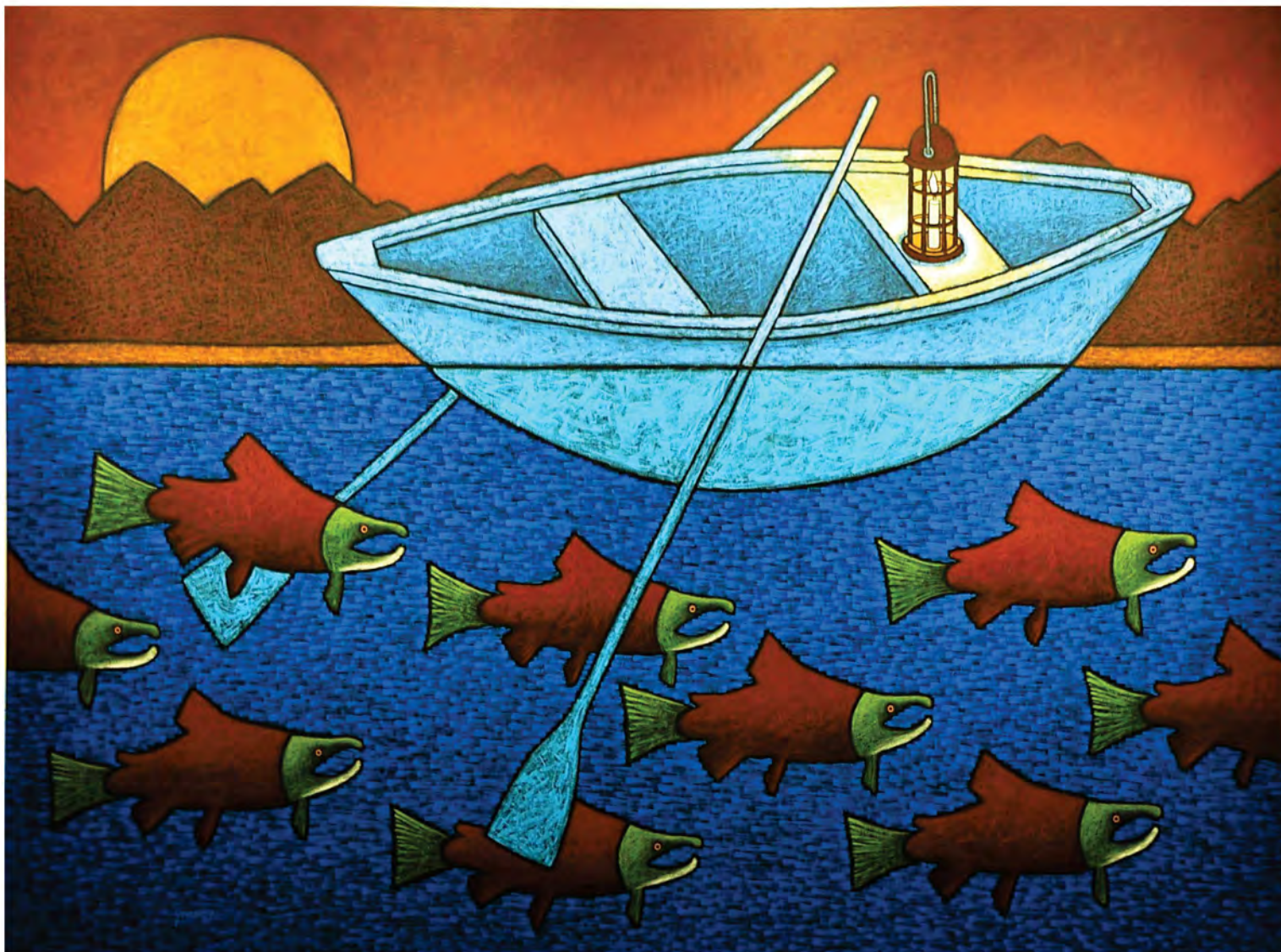
Following Page, bottom, **Beaver Pond Brookies**, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"

Changing Direction

Then, at the end of 2015, I decided to make a significant shift to a very different kind of image. Looking back on this, I realize there were several factors at play. On the one hand, I think I was starting to feel a bit burnt out with what I was doing. Working on the building images was intense and time-consuming, taking up to three weeks to complete a large piece. Long hours standing at the easel making small, precise brushstrokes had taken a toll, resulting in back and shoulder problems and eye strain.

At the same time, I was also finally willing to risk failure at trying something new. Despite my single-minded dedication to those images for many years, I had always held an interest in other ways of painting. I found myself admiring work that was very different from what I was doing.

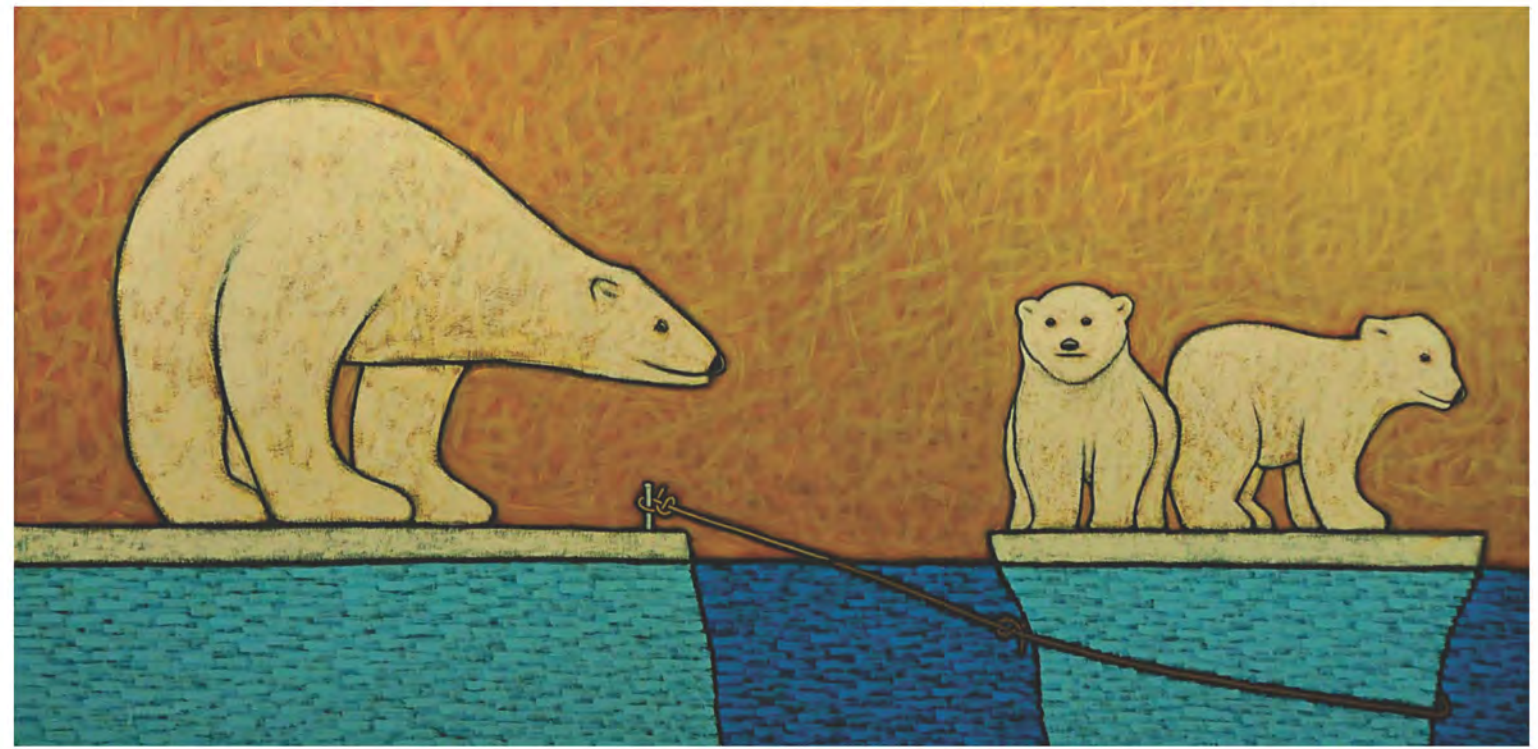




This Page, above, **Ranch Country Rainbows**, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"
Previous Page, top, **Night Passage**, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 36"
Previous Page, bottom, **Building Inspectors**, acrylic on canvas, 30" x 60"

I began to realize that I was after something more visceral and stylized; something more colourful. This involved a way of working that was more intuitive, drawing on "primitive" artforms and the visual texture of printmaking techniques. And, dare I say, something that was fun and whimsical. Why did art have to be so serious and high-brow?

But there were other factors as well. I had come to realize the importance of the natural world in my life – it was the one constant that had a rejuvenating effect on a daily basis. Most of our vacations have been to remote wilderness destinations, but we are also fortunate to live in a region where daily respite in a natural setting is very accessible. While painting landscapes might have been an obvious choice, it wasn't what I had in mind. Instead, another passion of mine – fly-fishing – became the initial inspiration for the new images.



This Page, top, **Last Piece of Ice**, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 24"

This Page, bottom, **Helicopter Parent**, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 48"

Previous Page, **Cold Therapy**, acrylic on canvas, 30" x 48"



This Page, above, **When No One is Watching 2**, acrylic on canvas, 16" x 20"
Following page, above, **Hard Wired**, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 36"

My website makes reference to this – riseformartworks – “riseform” is a term used by anglers to describe the ring that forms on water when a fish rises to the surface to take an insect.

New Style

In January 2016, I produced my first painting in this new style. It was a small picture of a trout. It is still perched on a window sill in my studio, and although not exactly what I had in mind, it was a start. From fish and fly-fishing themes, the paintings began to explore a range of animal subjects. I soon realized the potential of animal imagery. There is the obvious appeal that animals have for many of us, but also the anthropomorphic qualities as well – the animal as a stand-in for humans and their behaviours.



Some of the images have also alluded to environmental issues, but I have always strived to keep the images fun and playful. I don't want to dwell on dire messages (and I don't think it's particularly effective; and besides, that's what the daily news is for). Stylistically, this new work was quite a departure, but the medium was still acrylic. With the building images I was striving for a pristine surface, almost devoid of visible brushwork. But here, with these new images I celebrated the visual texture created by the interplay of a paint-laden brush and the weave of the canvas.



This Page, above, **Fish Phobia 2**, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"
Following Page, **the Opportunist**, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 36"

The Process

I use a black outline for the main elements of the image and then I use a form of dry-brush techniques to apply the numerous layers of colours. This involves dragging or scumbling the brush (usually assorted flat brushes) with fairly dry or stiff paint across the canvas so that the texture of the canvas grabs at the paint. This leaves small gaps as the paint skips across the depressions in the canvas, allowing the previous layers of paint to partly show through. I might describe it as a series of controlled accidents, as I don't know exactly what the final outcome will be, although I have a general idea from experience.

I like the animals to have reasonable anatomical accuracy, but I'm not after realism. A stylized, whimsical image is what I strive for. The compositions are generally very simple with only a few key elements. If successful, this can make for a very striking image, really focussing the viewer's attention. This was also the strategy that I used in the building images, so I guess some things carried over.



Following Page, top, *All the Time in the World*, acrylic on canvas, 40" x 30"

Ideas for paintings usually present themselves spontaneously, almost like a pop-up screen in the mind's eye. The best images seem to come quite easily. If I find myself struggling with a concept – drawing and re-drawing with no progress, it's usually best to abandon that one and move on. There are exceptions, but usually the good ones develop quickly.

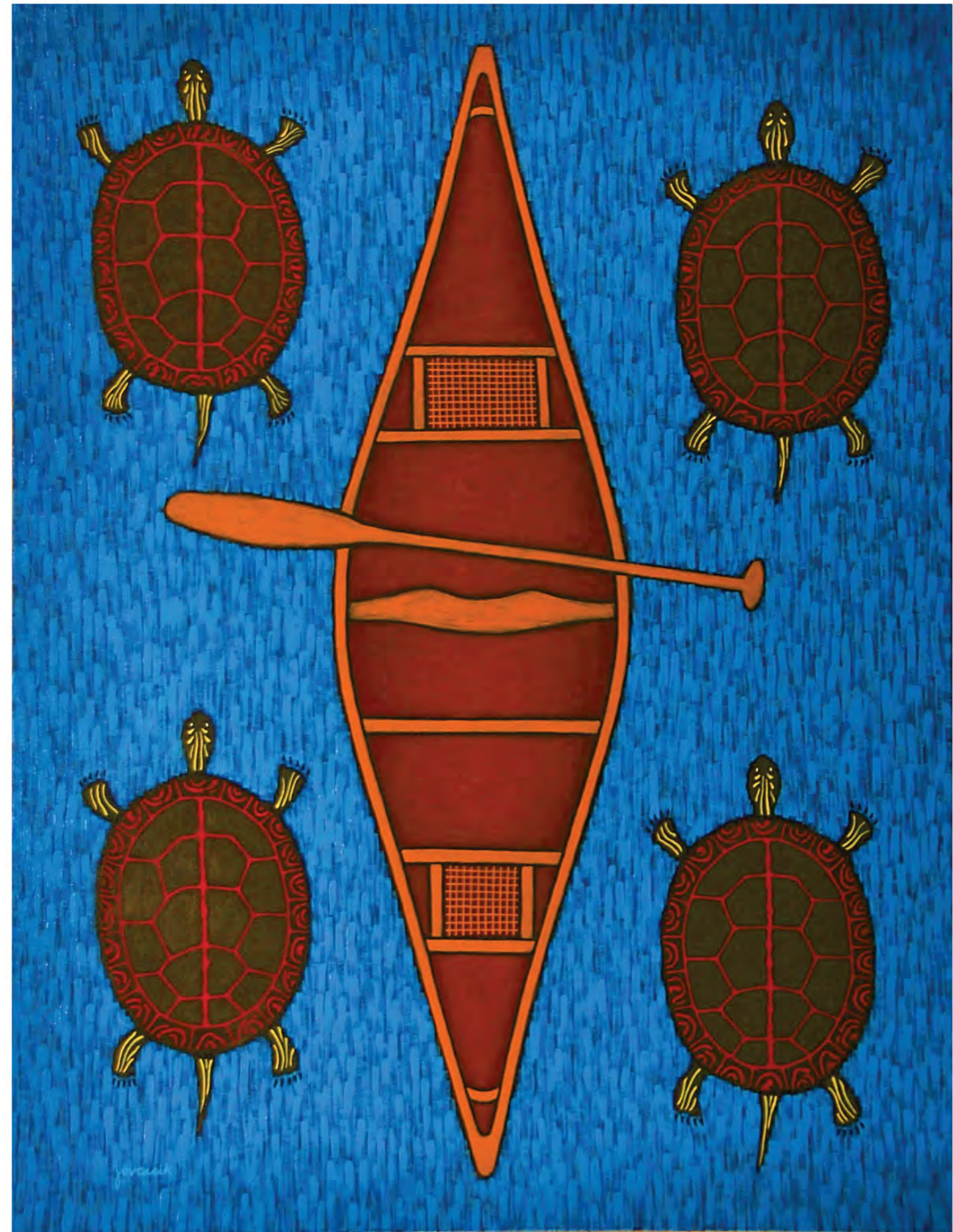
Since humour plays a large role in many of these paintings, I often find myself laughing out loud when a good image comes to mind. This is often accompanied by an idea for a clever title. When this happens, I figure I'm onto something – although not everyone shares my sense of humour. A large piece that recently sold at a local gallery went to a buyer who found the title to be so amusing that he asked if I would produce a small label with the title so he could display it with the painting. I thought that was kinda neat.

Observations

I would say the hardest thing about my work is facing that blank canvas. It's easy to fail, despite experience suggesting you probably succeed more often than not. Self-doubt can often creep in, especially when the ideas seem to run dry, or if there hasn't been a sale of a painting for a while. But there are many moments of inspiration and creative energy, and when that happens, you need to "make hay while the sun shines".

In addition to the various galleries that represent my work, I have also displayed some pieces at a local coffee shop, Les Saisons, in the village of Old Chelsea. It is about a 25 minute walk from my house and I end up there most mornings for a coffee, taking our dog Daegan for his morning outing. This arrangement with the coffee shop has given my work some local exposure and the opportunity to engage with folks who appreciate my work; something you don't usually get with commercial galleries.

Perhaps a shout-out here to the owner of Les Saisons, Cindi Minnes, who has generously supported local artists and provided a much loved hang-out for locals and visitors alike. Not to mention they serve some of the best coffee in the region. Chelsea, QC, Canada. www.cafelessaisons.com





This Page, left, **Hide and Seek**, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 24"

This Page, right middle, **Ice-Out**, acrylic on canvas, 16" x 16"

This Page, right bottom, **Should I Stay or Should I go**, acrylic on canvas, 16" x 16"

Following Page, top, **Crow Magnon**, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 12"

Following Page, bottom, **Rocks**, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 24"



This Last Year

This past "pandemic" year has been a strange and difficult one and most people are fed up and anxious to move on, so I won't dwell on it for too long. But I do think that this experience has exposed some long simmering issues that humanity has to address. Much has been said about the vulnerability of our health care systems and broader economy to such events, as well as the role of poverty and income inequality that unfairly punishes certain populations. Less attention has been focused on our relationship to the natural world and the role it has played in this and other pandemics. There are some positive changes emerging and I like to think that my work might, in some very small way, contribute to this trend toward a brighter future.

To learn more about John Ovcacik please visit, www.riseformartworks.com. John is represented by galleries located in Ontario and Quebec.

Please visit this gallery to see some new works:

ECLIPSE GALLERY
Huntsville, ON
www.eclipseartgallery.ca

**JOHN
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