

Artist to Collect

Peter McConville



Peter McConville



previous page, Fusion, 24.5" x 32.5"
above, Red Reflection, 30" x 40"



right, Red River at Scotia, 36" x 48"

written by Debra Usher

I fell in love with the work of Peter McConville years ago when I received an email informing me about an upcoming show at the Mayberry Gallery in Winnipeg. I was in Calgary at the time and that was a long way to go, so I picked up the phone and called the gallery. But we all know the story about waiting too long, and unfortunately the painting with red leaves falling to the ground was already gone. Well, I was hooked on Peter's work and kept checking him out online every few months or so. My perseverance paid off and today it is my great pleasure not only to see lots of Peter McConville's work but also to write about him. And in case you are wondering, "yes" I will be buying a Peter McConville painting and you will see it in this story.

Peter's Artistic Roots As A Political Painter In Northern Ireland

Peter McConville was born in Banbridge, Northern Ireland in 1951 and started drawing and painting seriously in his early teens. His art teacher, Vincent Scallon, encouraged him and a few other students to take extra art classes, which led to painting scenery for school plays and putting on art shows in the school. At the age of 13 he started selling his paintings. At 15 he began studying art at Lurgan College and at the same time began his first career – as a Textile Artist in one of Ireland's textile print companies. The position offered professional art employment as well as the opportunity to study fine art and design at Lurgan College.

Thus began the formation of Peter's hard-edge painting style. He states, "The printing process



left, Spirit Ridge, 40" x 30"

above, Spring, 30" x 40"

used in textile design forces the artist to break colour into solid shapes. I experimented with this technique creating surreal, dreamlike images. They had a great art program, which is still running, led by Victor Sloan who is considered one of Ireland's leading artists. My time at Lurgan College, working with so many other art students, was inspiring and extremely educational."

Peter's earlier paintings were displayed in Belfast as part of juried shows. Northern Ireland's history, rich with culture and scarred with conflict, was evident in this earlier work. "When I was sixteen, that's when I was really starting to mature as a painter. I knew I wanted to say some things, but I wasn't entirely sure how to do it. I found that painting just came very naturally to me."

"There were a lot of people killed in Northern Ireland. Shocking and frightening things were going on, really close to where I lived. There was

a lot of passion and a lot of hatred, and it seemed, to me, to come out of nowhere. So, I started to do a lot of painting. I really didn't think of myself as a political artist, but I was a political artist. I did a painting of a riot, paintings of prisoners and other things like that. When I did those paintings, I wasn't trying to convince people of a certain political message, it was more a matter of saying 'this is what's going on in Northern Ireland' and showing it to them in a different way."

Peter recalls a life-changing occasion, when he and his family were driving from his hometown of Banbridge to his wife's hometown of Newry. They had just come upon a big traffic jam, when a police officer stuck his head in the car window and disclosed there had been a terrible bombing and several people had been killed. "It was a horrific scene," Peter recalls. "We really didn't want to be part of that violence



Autumn Treehouse, 72" x 24"

in Northern Ireland any longer. So, I decided we had to get out of that place."

In 1974 Peter left the Northern Ireland conflict behind and immigrated to Winnipeg, but in 1983 returned again to Banbridge with his family and stayed there until 1986. He then returned to Canada and eventually settled back in Winnipeg, where he lives and works today.

Finding His Artistic Bearings In Canada

"When I left Ireland and came to Canada, I really lost my direction as an artist," Peter admits. He started moving toward representing what was going on in his new city. "I did a series of paintings called 'Urban Mirage' which were really about the mean streets of Winnipeg. They had hard, dark backgrounds with colours jumping out at you. I felt that they were very political paintings, and I felt they were strong," he explains. "If I hadn't made those paintings, I couldn't be doing the work I'm doing now."

Peter has been fortunate to meet many people along the way, artists and friends, who helped shape his journey as an artist. Both Vincent Scallon, the art teacher who encouraged him as a teenager at St. Patrick's School, and Victor Sloan, his art teacher and still personal friend at Lurgan College, got him started on the road to becoming the great artist he is today. Artists Bruce Head and Winston Leathers have helped shape some of his artistic decisions. And Bill Mayberry at Mayberry Fine Art was, and is, a great friend and supporter.

Peter McConville has always been inspired in art by the impressionists. Studying the careers of Picasso and Van Gogh helped to shape



Treehouse Study, 24" x 16"



Distant Shore, 40" x 60"



Prairie Birch Grove, 30" x 40"

some of his choices in art. Paul Nash and David Hockney also inspired his learning. But Peter states, "Perhaps the Beatles, Rolling Stones and David Bowie helped influence me even more." In Canada his artistic learning was shaped by Emily Carr, the Group of 7, Jack Shadbolt and Ivan Eyre. As you can see, like Peter's art, the list is eclectic, varied and unique.

Peter says, "I have very strong support from my friends and family, both in Canada and Ireland. Their ongoing interest and constant support are the most important things in my life and work."

over ten years ago, I've lost myself several times," he says. "I now use a compass and GPS. I think I get excited about the beauty of a place and forget about everything else." That excitement shows in his work; you can see he loves the images he is creating and the places he brings alive on the canvas, whether real or imagined.

His wife Marian manages the business side of the art. "I love working at home with my family around," Peter says. And having a home studio comes in handy, as work sometimes continues late into the night and he forgets to go to bed. His

birch groves in and around Winnipeg and the Canadian Shield are inspiring. He goes to Lake of the Woods, Ontario several times a year and takes photos and drawings on location. His best work comes from his experiences in these places.

Peter says, "I also make imagined places inspired by my experiences. The combination of different ideas, images and imagination create emotion and drama in my paintings."

In his studio Peter keeps a part of an old birch tree and several rocks. He also has about 50 drawing books full of ideas for inspiration. There

are Canadians – Ivan Eyre, Andrew Valko, Evan Penny and Joe Fafard, and Internationals – Chuck Close, Peter Doig, David Hockney, Alex Katz, John Curran, Victor Sloan and George Condo.

"I think it is important to keep painting all the time, work hard and take chances," Peter says. "Artists need to develop their own style and that takes time and a lot of hard work. There are a lot of very good artists out there – everywhere you look. I try to improve with every painting and discover new techniques and effects. I hope others see the effort and also see my work as original."



Jack Pine Ridge, 24" x 24"



Last Stand, 36" x 60"



Morning Light, 24" x 24"

Painting And Planning

Peter likes planning exhibitions with his gallery. He finds working with small teams inspiring and motivating. "Working with Bill, Shaun and Ryan Mayberry and everybody at Mayberry Fine Art gallery has been a true pleasure. I am really looking forward to the upcoming show this year."

Being a city dweller, Peter can find his way around most cities fairly easily but when it comes to the great Canadian outdoors he sometimes gets lost. "Since I started painting landscapes,

whole basement is a studio, divided into working areas. "I have a large art table 48" x 48' that I use to gesso and later varnish paintings. The main room has 2 very large easels – the main easel has 2 large narrow tables one at each side. The great thing about the space is that I don't have to put things away after I work on a painting. I can just stop and start whenever I want to and everything is ready to go."

Inspiration for his work comes from areas near where he lives or trips he takes. The oak and

is an I Mac with a scanner and a good photo printer. All of his recent photos, drawings and paintings are stored on his computer for reference at anytime.

He has worked with watercolour, pen and ink, oils and stained glass but his favourite medium is acrylic paint because of its versatility and how quickly it dries.

Peter admires artists who work very hard on every piece they create and produce a large amount of high-quality art. Some of his favourites

When not painting, you can find Peter in the local coffee shops, watching soccer on TV or going out for dinner with friends and family. And when he's working or just hanging out, he always loves to have music playing.

A Series Painter

Peter McConville is a series painter. For years he painted people in an urban setting. When he changed to landscapes he began focusing on one thing at a time – first trees, then water. Peter says,



Birch Study, 8" x 8"

"My current series is from a trip I took to Lake of the Woods, Ontario on the warmest January day we've seen here in Winnipeg in years. People keep talking about the weather and global warming. It was strange to see snow melting and new buds on the trees in January."

A lot of the paintings in this series will be part of the concept for his spring show in Toronto at Mayberry Fine Art. "I like working on a series of paintings for a show," Peter states, "there is a nice flow about the whole process. Every year I do a few large commissions which provide a unique challenge that I really enjoy."

Peter's painting style and use of colour is a reflection of all his experiences. He uses a combination of expressive under-painting, using big brushes, which is then followed by layers of dots and glazes painted in complementary colours.

Because of this complex under and over style it takes a long time to produce one of his paintings. There are times when he wishes he could use a faster medium that would enable him to produce more work but then it wouldn't have the right look or feel.

Peter starts with an idea that is part of the series he is working on at the time. He then creates a small drawing to figure out the relationship of the subjects in the painting. Next he prepares the canvas with several layers of coloured gesso. He does a light sanding between coats. He will make a final drawing about 8" by 10" and then redraw the image on canvas with grey paint.

"I paint the whole canvas with thin paint (glaze) using 2 or 3 colours only. I add more for colour

and contrast. I then add details and dots all over the canvas." He varnishes all his paintings using Golden 2 varnish system. The first coat is a permanent soft gel medium and the second is a removable varnish, Golden Varnish with UVLs.

"Everything I paint, no matter what stage it's at, I treat as though it's finished. That's how I'm continuously adding layers of interest, but also adding layers of quality. I really have to be critical of what I do, to make sure I'm putting my best work out there. I want to evoke mood in my work," Peter adds. "Rather than it 'saying' something, I'm trying to move people. I'm not trying to get them politically excited – it's more about feeling and colour. I'm trying to get across the emotion I felt when I saw what I'm painting."

Personal Tragedies

Peter describes his paintings as "coming from the soul" and from those experiences he's "encountered along life's highway."

"Personal tragedies affect everybody, not just artists. We are not unique in that sense," Peter insists. Unlike many of us, however, great artists do harness and communicate the significance of these momentous life-changing moments to the world. The greatest tragedy to befall Peter and his family was the loss of his daughter, Cathy. "She was a really energetic, very positive and intelligent young woman. Like me, Cathy was a visual artist; she was also a dancer," Peter describes. On holiday in Northern Ireland, the family discovered that Cathy had Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. "When we lost Cathy, I was just a shell. When I started painting again, I really felt like I was carrying on the work that she wouldn't be able to do," Peter reveals.

After the loss of his daughter, Peter found himself drawn to painting realistic landscapes. "I really want to create paintings that are timeless," he explains. "I want them to have almost a spirit within them, which is something you get when you turn your back on the city. I think it's very interesting that, right in the middle of a big city like Winnipeg, you can find places along the rivers that haven't changed for hundreds of years. They are the same trees today that people passed as they canoed down the river – long before immigrants like me got here."



Last Year's Leaves, 48" x 36"



above, Headland, 60" x 71.5"

top left, Gold Leaf Bay, 48" x 48"

bottom left, Last Leaves, 24" x 24"



above, Gold Dust, 24" x 24"



right, Warm March Melt, 48" x 36"

Peter's own battle

Peter notes that his 'River City' series came about because of his health. "I had cancer and had to have major surgery at St. Boniface Hospital. As soon as I came around after the surgery, I started to draw. When I was really down I would draw myself, sort of the Peter McConville version of Frida Kahlo," he recalls.

Peter's recovery also required him to exercise, so he would walk down the hallway and stare out at the great view from a huge window. "I could see the river, I could see the Forks and it gave me hope," Peter reveals. "It was something I really gravitated towards. One idea that kept building in my mind had to do with the city and the river, so that's where the series came from."

It may be difficult to imagine a series so bright and beautiful born out of such difficult

circumstances, but Peter was able to focus his creative passion on the future. "I was very sick," he says, "but I saw hope through that window. I saw something I wanted, and was determined to get back out there and paint again."

Peter feels very at home with the paintings he's doing right now. "There's a lot of hope in them," Peter confides. "If you know what it's like to pick yourself up after being knocked down to the ground a couple of times, and get back into the game of life – that's what made these paintings. I wanted them to be a celebration of life."

For more of Peter McConville's iconic work, visit www.mayberryfineart.com. or you can see his paintings in person at Mayberry Fine Art – either the Winnipeg, Manitoba, or Toronto, Ontario Gallery.



above, Grey Motion, 36" x 48"
below, Snow Capped Ridge, 30" x 40"

above, Twist, 30" x 40"
below, Morning frost, 30" x 40"



