

A Painter's Perspective

A photograph of Neil Patterson, a man with a long grey beard and glasses, wearing a dark blue t-shirt and jeans. He is standing in profile, facing right, and is actively painting a large, vibrant landscape on a wooden easel. The painting depicts a rocky shoreline with a waterfall, a river, and a small boat with a person. The background shows a studio filled with other framed paintings on the walls and various art supplies on a table in the foreground.

Long-time Bragg Creek resident Neil Patterson shares his thoughts on growing up in Little Chicago, sex, painting, and the pursuit of perfect happiness

Neil Patterson is a living legend. In 2000 he became the first Canadian to be granted Master Signature status by the prestigious Chicago-based Oil Painters of America. In 2008 he became the first Canadian to be elected President of the OPA. Neil's paintings have been exhibited in seven Canadian provinces and in 17 different U.S. states on this continent, as well as at seven museums in China, including the National Museum of Beijing.

Master Painter Neil Patterson in his home studio, surrounded by his work.



You grew up in Moose Jaw. What was that like?

Saskatchewan makes us tough. Moose Jaw was bad in my day, because there were always fights between Moose Jaw and Regina. Guys would come to Moose Jaw with their revolvers ... that kind of stuff. Did you know Moose Jaw was called Little Chicago? It was a tough place to be when I was a young boy. The police were always on the take; they'd steal from the shops. I remember the mayor's nephew had some guys from Regina dancing with his revolver outside the police station – boom, boom, boom – crazy things.

Tell me about your journey from Moose Jaw to Bragg Creek.

I was trained as an architectural draftsman, which in Saskatchewan would only get me 200 bucks a month, so I came to Calgary because I was offered 345 bucks. So I took the job there, working for most of the architects in town. I also had my own drafting company. I've always painted, but in the early years it was easier to sell pots than it was paintings. I had a deal with the Quest stores – there were outlets in Victoria, Vancouver and Banff – whereby I would have watercolour painting shows put on with the pottery shows. I painted all the time, but it was easier to make a living with pots. So I stuck with pottery and I wrecked my hands. Eventually my specialist said, "Either change your occupation or lose the use of your hands." So I changed my occupation.

What was the whole transition like for you?

It was just slow: It's not done overnight. It's like a Willie Nelson story – he played a lot of bars before anybody ever heard him sing on a record. My philosophy is that the world is in a constant state of change, so you just roll with the punches. You can't do anything about it; it's just the way things are. People



are always concerned about the permanency of the painting, but as soon as I take that paint out of the tube, it starts to deteriorate. Just like you and I, as soon as we're born, we start to deteriorate. The whole world is that way – nothing stays the same. Bragg Creek will never stay the same: It's always going to evolve. A fire goes through and burns – it's part of life, new stuff comes up. I've had so many occupations in my life – I had a gallery, I've been an architect, a draftsman, I've worked as a brick-layer ... I've done just about everything. I've even run bees, thousands of bee hives that I trucked from Chico, California. I've sold shoes too.

You've described many of your paintings as happy accidents. Was Bragg Creek a happy accident for you, or was it intentional?

When I was in Calgary and started making pots, I developed a real feel for Bragg Creek. I used to come out here in the winter and just sort of chill. Bragg Creek was a wonderful paradise when I first saw it: What we have here is very beautiful. After the long winters, the summers here make it all really worthwhile. Everything grows so fast, the clover is so beautiful, and the smell is extraordinary! So that's what drew me to Bragg Creek. And it was close enough that if you wanted to take a plane some place, it wasn't too far away. We have our own little world out here, especially with Kananaskis and the Reserve. Everything is sort of contained in a little pocket. I have enough property so that if I want to go out and paint the trees, I can do that. I don't care what the neighbours do; just leave me alone. ▶▶



Paintings from top: "Approaching Storm" 24 by 48 inches; "Still Waters" 18 by 24 inches; "Golden Sky" 24 by 36 inches. All paintings are oil on canvas by Neil Patterson, 2009.

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You say you don't believe in talent, but rather in a combination of desire and soul. How do you connect with your soul?

By not having any pre-conceived ideas about anything. As you get to know yourself and as you get older, you connect with what's inside you because the rest really doesn't matter. I've always been sort of a loner: I don't really care what people think about me. As long as I'm pleased with myself, I'm okay. So if someone says, "You look really stupid with that beard," which I've heard people say, I reply, "Well, that's my business, not yours. And I don't really care." You connect with your soul when painting because it's what is inside of you, what you think is important, what you like about things, and about your inner being. I can't be a realistic painter like Bateman, because my personality isn't like that, so there is no use trying. You have to find that true calling within yourself, you have to be comfortable with it, and then everything will be fine.

You have said that for you, painting is all about playing with colour. What does it feel like for you to play?

A finished painting is just a widget. What intrigues me is the painting process, as opposed to the end product. I just take the idea of what's out there and then I fill in what I want. I tell all my students, "If you had a rose out here in the sun and you took the best rose painter in the world to paint that rose, and then you took the painting and put it up against the rose, which one would win out?" The real rose, because you're dealing with light, right? What you're dealing with here is just pigment, and you simply cannot reproduce light with pigment. Once people understand that, they don't become so frustrated, because they no longer have a pre-conceived idea that it's going to be exactly like what is out there. It's like having a baby, you know, you get what you get.

Painting for you is all about passion. How does Bragg Creek inspire your passion?

Passion comes from a lifetime of living, so Bragg Creek is a little part of that passion. It's a combination of one's life plus what Bragg Creek is, and Bragg Creek is renewable. And it's all about renewal after the long winter – those wonderful smells! You know, you can smell the earth in the spring. It's so fast here, so immediate. There is hardly any spring. It goes straight from snow-packs in our front yard to everything wanting to grow. That's why it's so wonderful here: You see that and you feel like a squirrel, full of passion to get ready for the next winter. It all relates to the painting process. Passion is just what's inside of you, all those life experiences. I figure that if you're going to do something, you may as well do it passionately, no matter what it is.

When I think about a Master Painter, or when I look at an Old World Master's painting, there is a sense of Godliness at play. What does being considered a modern-day master mean to you?

I don't feel I'm any great anything: I just like to fiddle around with paint. That's really all it is. You know, it's the same as being a carpenter. A carpenter puts up a house; I just happen to do this. One is not any better than the other. If I had piles and piles and piles of money, nobody probably would ever see my paintings, because the real enjoyment would come just from doing the painting. The best one is always the next one, so it's a road that never ends. It's not that you become this so-called master and it's done, because it's going to go on forever. And the more you paint, the more you find out that you don't really know what you're doing. When you first start out, you feel like you're hot shit and then, as time goes by, you realize you're not hot shit ... you hardly know anything.

So what do you feel like when you're in your element, when you're in your zone?

It's usually a calming feeling, but it can also be frustrating. It's a tactile sort of thing: When you pick up paint and you put it on, like peanut butter, you can get shivers up your back, you know. It's really hard to explain, but it's a wonderful, wonderful feeling, to just play. The playing, the feeling of going back to being a child and just playing ... it really doesn't matter what you put on or what you don't. You don't think. Painting is like sex: You think about it before and after, but you shouldn't think about it while you're doing it. Because if you did, sex wouldn't be very enjoyable. Likewise, painting should be intuitive. It's like shooting a longbow: You don't use a sight. Just do it, and it ends up in the right place.

What's your idea of perfect happiness?

Perfect happiness, to me, is rooted in being a Buddhist. Buddhism is accepting what is and continuing on because that's the way it is. I think unhappy people are mostly people that want to change things that they can't change. Like us having deer here that come and eat the plants and flowers. What can you do about it? You get a hailstorm; what can you do about it? If you're really

concerned about the hailstorm devastating your plants and you're all pissed off about that, that's going to make you unhappy. But if you just say, "Well, that's part of what the whole world is all about," then you can become happy. It's true happiness because that's the way it is, so you just accept everything. You just have to take it as it comes, roll with the punches, and the more you can do that, the happier you'll be.



View some of Neil Patterson's recent masterpieces at the Alicat Gallery in Bragg Creek or at: www.alicatgallery.com ■

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