

art of the peace

SPRING 2012 ■ ISSUE 18

A PUBLICATION FOR THE VISUAL ARTIST



Suzanne Sandboe

SEEING IS KNOWING

AOTP SYMPOSIUM 2012

FOLLOWING THE LIGHT

THREE METAL ARTISTS



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SEEING IS KNOWING

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Behind her unrestrained veil of creativity, whether she's working on an expansive, transparent watercolour mural of the local landscape for an area school, doing her own framing or churning out clay, kiln-fired pieces in her beautiful, 2,000 square foot "Canvas & Clay Art Studio" in the country, Suzanne Sandboe exudes qualities we associate less with leisurely, painterly artists and more with stock brokers and brain surgeons: ambitious, determined and always, always busy. "I need to have 48 hours in the day instead of 24 hours," she jokes. "There aren't enough hours to get everything done, but I always manage."

But going beyond that veil, there's another part of the artist that finds its way into her work. Sandboe also works part time as controller for her husband's Grande Prairie based company. A book-keeper by trade, she employs the same skills necessary to succeed in her part-time profession as she does in pursuing her passion: detail oriented, analytical, methodical, with meticulous eyes always open and searching for something. "I think the artist sees things differently than most people do," she says.

Born and raised in the Peace Country, Sandboe, who traces her ancestry to both Norway and Czechoslovakia, fondly recalls a childhood growing up on her parents' farm, deeply in tune with nature and the surrounding landscape. The yearning to begin creating art began at a very



young age, and it came very naturally, as she was in lower grade school when she first realized that she could draw. Developing this talent over the years on her own, she began experimenting with different mediums and started painting with watercolours, enthralled by the immediacy of the medium. "I've always kind of wanted to try everything," she says. "I enjoy many different things so as a result I've kind of dipped my fingers in a lot of different pies and tried lots of different things over the years."

In high school, a mentor gave Sandboe a set of oil paints and all the supplies needed, so she moved into painting with oils, an artistic form she would adhere to for several years to come. While she enjoyed this medium, she felt a strong desire to return to painting with watercolours, a yearning to return to the start after having benefited from years of experience. "Any art should be progressing, your work should be improving and changing, and you learn new things as you go along and you experiment and try new things," she says. "As I look back on my career as an artist, things are much different now than they were 25 years ago when I first starting painting. Your style grows and you become a much more solid, well-rounded, confident artist and you become a sort of master at your medium." And once she found her way back, things just took off from there. She began selling her work through Unique Gallery in Grande Prairie in 1989, making a name for herself in the area. From 2002 to 2006, her work could be found at the Front Gallery in Edmonton. "When you've been around and doing art for as long as I have, people get to know you, and I've been very well supported by the Peace Country," she says.

But perhaps the most remarkable thing about Sandboe is that she is primarily self-taught, citing love and passion as her impetus for creating. "I didn't actually go to art school,"



she says. "I've taken some workshops over the years, but my primary learning is through experimentation and what I've gathered from workshops and what I've gathered from doing things on my own. I know a lot of artists have this sort of philosophical story behind all of their work, and I'm sort of not that way. I don't have a lot of 'art speak' when it comes to explaining what I do, I just do what I do because I love doing it. I enjoy creating, painting and drawing, I just don't know if there's much philosophy behind it."

All modesty aside, Sandboe's repertoire of workshops is actually quite impressive, including wheel throwing with Bibi Clements in 2000, pottery with Yasuo Tirada in 1999 and watercolours with Jim Adrain in 1990, the first watercolour workshop she ever took. To further her education, she participated in the Red Deer College Summer Series Art Program, where she gained additional instruction in watercolours and wheel throwing. In addition to being a student in several workshops, she has taught watercolour workshops in Grande Prairie, Beaverlodge and Sexsmith, and hopes to possibly begin teaching classes in her studio in the future. Her professional associations are extensive. She was accepted as a member of the Federation of Canadian Artists three years ago, joined the Alberta Society of Artists 12 years ago and joined the Peace Watercolour Society 27 years ago, where she has served on the executive board for over 18 years.



Needless to say, Sandboe isn't exactly a novice in the Peace Country art world of massive scenes of the Western Canadian landscape, gorgeous mountain vistas and serene images of forests and rivers. "It's about painting the local community and the people and the things that happen here," she says. "As I grew up, we did a lot of fishing and camping, and so I enjoy the mountains, rivers and nature. It's kind of a common thread that runs through my work, the countryside, the landscape and the history of people."

Her ties to the local landscape can be best seen in a work she completed last year for the County of Grande Prairie's Farm Family Award, entitled *Four Up, Ace, King, Gypsy, Ginger*—a striking, heartfelt work that belied her background as a young, headstrong farmer's daughter. Another work derived from and reminiscent of her childhood is *Saddle Hills Evening*, a glowing, almost ethereal piece inspired by her time spent on her father's and grandfather's cattle grazing bush land up north in Saddle Hills. Soft beams of light stream through the forest, and a sense of nostalgia settles over the scene. "This piece is of the evening sun setting through the trees, and it's just what it's like up there, with all the poplars and aspen," she says. "It's beautiful, it's very peaceful, and we spend a lot of time up there. Our family has always been very close but going back to the land has kept us close." *Angel Glacier Pond* at Mt. Edith Cavell demonstrates Sandboe's ability to convey emotion and a story in



FAR LEFT

Ideal light filtering onto Suzanne's old oak painting table

LEFT

Suzanne with a selection of her watercolours

RIGHT

Saddle Hills Evening

FAR RIGHT

Four Up, Ace, King, Gypsy, Ginger

a painting. Roughly 12 years ago, she and a group of artist friends set off on a trip to Jasper to record the landscape, with easels and paint in tow. "The mountains are very near to my heart," she says. "It was really cold out and we spent the whole day up there. The atmosphere was incredible, full of mist and clouds."

But Sandboe, always the experimenter, wouldn't be fulfilled just adhering to one subject matter. While she loves to paint landscape, she is particularly drawn to portraying historical items. Take, for instance, her work *Outta Gas*. While out taking a drive one day and looking for things to paint, Sandboe came across a group of old buildings that were most likely old country or hardware stores. Moved by the historical significance of the scene, she decided to record the moment. "I was driving along and spotted these amazing old buildings," she says. "There was the shell of an old gas pump there, and it just struck me: they're out of gas."

Despite the immediacy in her work, sometimes the process can take years in the making. Roughly 20 years ago, Sandboe traveled down to Pipestone Creek for a family reunion, where, unbeknownst to the artist, paleontologists would make a notable dinosaur fossil discovery. "I had gotten up really early one morning and gone down to the creek to do some sketching, about 6 a.m., and I remember it really well because it was kind of spooky and it was cool and damp, and no one was up at the campsite," she says. "I went down there and spent the morning drawing and I walked away with several sketches in my sketchbooks." Two sketches

from this trip eventually made their way into finished works, one, entitled *Bone-bed*, which Sandboe had the honor of presenting to Dan Aykroyd and his wife at last year's inaugural ball for the fundraiser for the Philip J. Currie Dinosaur Museum in Grande Prairie. The other painting, entitled *Midnight Moon on Pipestone*, was donated to the museum itself. Despite seeming like straightforward images of landscape, Sandboe's talented hand draws the viewer in with striking visual elements and allows the viewer to see beyond the surface, becoming acquainted with and eventually knowing a deep, emotional realm.

When beginning the creative process, Sandboe often begins with a sketch, taking photographs as a backup, although she states that she believes that what you see and then transfer, pencil to paper, is not necessarily what stands out in a photograph, preferring instead to have a quick sketch of what it was that grabbed her in the first place. "I grew up in the country, so I'm always looking for things to paint," she says. "I'm always paying attention to the environment and what's around me." Whether she's going out with the sole intention of finding an object to paint, or if she just happens upon something fascinating and worthy of being recorded on canvas, she continually exists with eyes open. "What I paint is what I see," she says. "I don't just sit down and make up something, I like to see it, feel it or experience it, and that's kind of what I do. I've got my eyes open and when I see things, I become enthused and it makes me want to create and paint. It just comes to me naturally." The spontaneity in Sandboe's work is palpable, and while many artists might overwork a landscape, not quite knowing when to stop adding elements



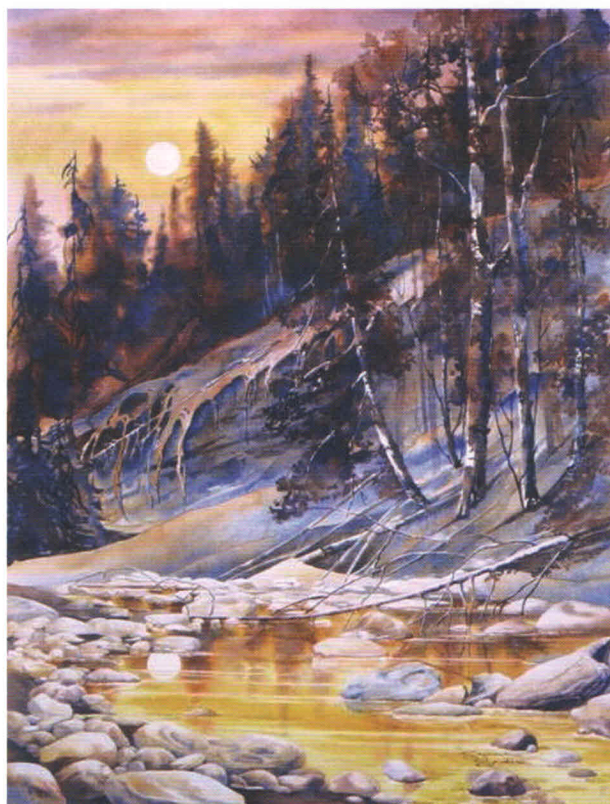
to a work, she strikes a balance between composition and liveliness, her muted watercolours always convey a story, a feeling, an expression.

Describing her style as "realistic yet painterly," Sandboe's broad artistic range allows her to be capable of doing a lot of different things, engendering a body of work that manages to stay fresh and interesting instead of becoming stale and stagnant. "In my work, I like there to be a lot of expression and I like to try and tell a story," she says. "I want the viewer to get something out of the painting when he or she looks at it."

As far as future plans go, Sandboe, always the busy artist, has a few shows coming up, including a show for the Federation of Canadian Artists and a group exhibition with the Peace Watercolour Society, as well as a list of commission work to complete. She hopes to do a solo show soon, most likely with a historical focus. "I'd like to do something about our heritage, our roots, where we come from," she says. My

grandparents came from the old country and arrived in Canada, so I think it would be interesting to explore how they landed, where they went and how they lived."

For Sandboe, seeing is knowing, and knowing is essential to the creative process. "Someone once told me paint what you know and you'll be a lot more successful at what you do," she says. "And that's exactly what I do."



TOP
Outta Gas

BOTTOM
Midnight Moon on Pipestone Creek

Suzanne Sandboe

CANVAS AND CLAY ART STUDIO

BY DEB GUERRETTE



Photo by Candice Pook

Stepping across the driveway at her Buffalo Lakes area home to enter a bright, open, two-story studio makes going to work for Suzanne Sandboe as natural and comfortable as painting itself comes to her. "Kind of like a little house," the studio is a wood-frame building, with 10-foot first floor ceilings, tall windows and many other built-in features. "The taller ceiling is great," said Sandboe, standing in the gallery of her Canvas and Clay Art Studio. With canvases and murals that often span eight feet or more, "it provides a little head space... just to be able to display art, and it gives me the ability to do some bigger pieces."

The couple settled on their acreage in 1983, raising two boys, with Sandboe painting in the family's kitchen throughout those years, she said, recalling, "art stuff under the beds," and framing pictures in the basement.

Finally in 2007, after considering different options, they started building the studio. A framer was hired to build the main structure, and other parts contracted, but they also did a lot of the work themselves, with the studio ready enough to occupy after two and a half years.

At 1000 square feet, the main floor has an acid washed, varnished cement floor, with in-floor heating, and is primarily a large open gallery room. Separated by French doors, a kitchen area is complete with cupboards, sink, fridge, stove and working-island on wheels. "We tried to put in everything, to make it user friendly," Sandboe said.

While Sandboe says she "debated white" for the walls, she went with light beige to "bring a little life to the place." The

surround-sound they included is user friendly too, as is the built-in vacuum on both floors, forced air heating for the second floor, and other well-planned features. Both florescent and track lighting are used, with Sandboe's old oak painting table in a corner of the gallery area, angled to face the tall windows on the east and north sides of the gallery.

Offering workshops is one of Sandboe's plans for the studio and either the kitchen or gallery area can be used for that. A kiln, a small work area and some shelving for pottery is also set up in the kitchen area. The second floor is the framing studio. Furnished with antique couches and chairs it includes a bedroom and bathroom, making the studio a ready and comfortable guest house for visitors.

"My art is my business. I will always, always, always paint. But who knows, down the road, it could be an in-law-suite, or bed and breakfast," Sandboe said. The best part of the dedicated space she now enjoys, "is being able to work away at your project and then just go away from it, and it's still there in the morning waiting for you to come back and work again."

The Canvas and Clay Art Studio was meant to be more than just convenient too, says Sandboe, who "loves," the art studio cottage industry she's seen on west coast islands that is "part of the culture there." "That's kind of the idea here," she says of her studio, "a place for people to come to, a place to hang my art, a place to work from. I still show my work (other places) but this is kind of a one-stop shop. People can come in and see what I do, and buy art here if they want."