

ARTS&LIFE

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Double vision

Clarence Porter’s urban esthetic meets Lesia Mokrycke’s intimate gardens



REGINA HAGGO
OPINION

A painting can inspire, but it also needs a source of inspiration. Sometimes inspiration comes while driving on the 407, or from a faraway war that strikes at the heart of who you are.

“A Path to Interplay,” an exhibition at Earls Court Gallery, showcases two award-winning artists, Clarence Porter and Lesia Mokrycke. Both can be described as landscape painters, but their styles and sources of inspiration differ.

Porter’s background includes graphic design and teaching. He paints with pastels. This allows him to create soft-edged, yet solid and structured lifelike shapes.

“I love working with pastels because of the range and intensity of colours and their immediacy,” he tells me. “With the range of colours I have at my disposal and the ease of application, I can convey moods and feelings quickly. I don’t have to mix paints or wait for anything to dry.

“If I’m not happy with the direction the painting is going, I take a coarse bristle brush and a kneaded eraser and remove the areas I’m not happy with. Then I layer other colours over top of that area and continue on.”

Porter’s paintings often offer an easy entry with a centrally placed path or road.

“I chose reference images from photos I had taken that addressed the concept of paths, but leading the eye on a visual journey was only one part of this,” he says. “I wanted the paintings to speak not only to the literal but the abstract: the journey, the going, the thought, the learning.”

In “Just Us Two — II” we find the artist and ourselves driving on Highway 407 behind a truck. Clusters of trees flank the road below a



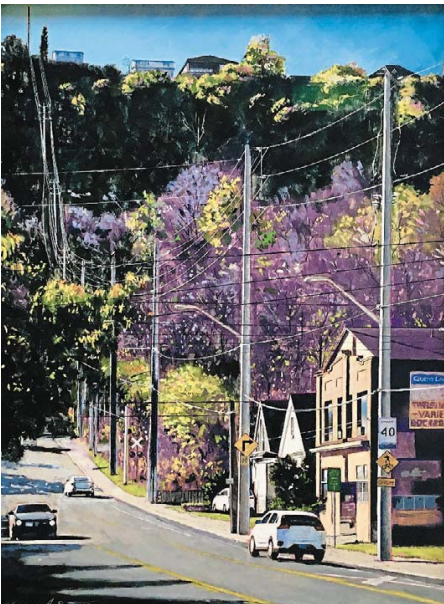
Lesia Mokrycke, "Sunrise," oil on canvas, 10 by 8 inches.

dramatic sky that takes up two-thirds of the composition.

“The title references a drive I made one morning on the 407,” Porter says. “It was a beautiful morning with big clouds and sunlight peeking through spaces causing long shadows. It was early and I was heading to Markham to teach an all-day workshop. When I exited onto the 407, I came upon a dark blue pickup truck. The truck and I drove for several kilometres without another vehicle in front of or behind us. I felt serene and inspired, because it was just us two and the quiet morning.”

In “Down Wentworth to Charlton Ave” we approach one of the Mountain accesses. Utility poles and wires reinforce the rising of the road and the Wentworth Street stairs continue the curve of the wires. Three buildings stand under a vast canopy of trees whose mauve foliage is brought to life with dabs of green, white, pink and yellow. A row of houses peeps out from the top of the treed escarpment.

While Porter embraces the urban esthetic with its paths and streets, Mokrycke chooses the intimacy of



the garden. She’s an environmentalist who teaches landscape architecture, among other accomplishments. Her oil paintings verge on abstraction. That is, organic shapes and brush strokes suggest place, rather than fully describe it. This style is appropriate: her gardens are in danger of disappearing.

Mokrycke says the paintings began in 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine. As someone whose Ukrainian ancestors came to Canada to work as wheat farmers, she is profoundly affected by this war and its ongoing destruction.

“Suddenly it seemed there was a collapse of building, and home, and garden as if they were all folding in on themselves,” she says. “And what one is left with is this disordered sense of space that is sometimes garden, sometimes not. Sometimes a window is visible, sometimes a wall. But in the paintings sometimes the garden takes over and

Clarence Porter, "Down Wentworth to Charlton Ave.," pastel, 25 by 18 inches.



Lesia Mokrycke, "House," oil on canvas, 36 by 48 inches.

YOUR HEALTH

How exercise helps reawaken the brain after a long Ontario winter



MATTHEW LEES
OPINION

Things are finally beginning to shift here in Ontario — the air is softening and the weight of winter is starting to lift at last. Even if the temperatures are still flirting with single digits, the longer days and intermittent sunshine are signalling momentum.

The onset of spring represents not just a seasonal transition, but a physical and neurological one as well. After months of diminished daylight, reduced physical activity, and a tendency toward indoor activities, our brains are anticipating change. In this spirit, few if any interventions are as powerful as getting active.

The winter shutdown

Winters in Ontario subtly shape brain function by disrupting circadian rhythms and lowering serotonin production. This contributes to fatigue, low mood, and blunted motivation. Our physical activity levels often decline, especially our time spent outdoors, which compounds the problem.

This period reduces neurogenesis (the formation of new neurons) and lowers levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF — the brain’s “fertilizer”). This all coincides with increased mental sluggishness and a decline in cognitive function. A great analogy for this is that the brain has effectively entered “power-save” mode, but spring is where the switch gets flipped.

Exercise as a starter motor for the nervous system

As the weather (tentatively!) improves we can begin moving around more, and this increased movement has immediate and profound effects on the brain. Aerobic exercise, in particular, stimulates the release of BDNF which supports neuron formation and synaptic plasticity (the brain’s ability to learn and adapt). At the same time, exercise enhances dopamine and serotonin signalling, which improves mood and motivation.

What’s important here is the synergy with spring itself. Increased daylight exposure amplifies these neurotransmitter systems, boosting the overall effect.

There’s something decidedly different about stepping outside for a walk in April versus January. Even if it’s still brisk, the psychological framing changes and the environment feels less oppressive. Outdoor exercise introduces additional benefits for the brain: natural light exposure helps recalibrate circadian rhythms and sensory stimulation from the environment engages the mind.

SEE HEALTH, G2

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