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Joy Laking: Seeing with Passionate Eyes

by Shawna Macivor



A couple of years ago, I had the chance to travel in Ireland with a high school friend from Owen Sound, Ontario, the artist Joy Laking. We rambled along the west coast, with Joy sketching and taking photos. One afternoon we were perched on a rock near the sea and Joy was absorbed in her watercolours. The shoreline, the distant hills and an exquisite violet-coloured, sky-reflecting sea appeared under her brush. Unnerved by my staring, she suddenly stopped and fished out of her bag a small 5”x7” square of stiff watercolour paper and a black Staedtler 0.5 pen. “Here,” she said, “try it. Just draw what you see. I mean,” she paused, “just notice what you see and then draw it.”

That comment struck me then, and now, as quintessential Joy. In our rushed world, we receive a myriad of impressions but most of us register very little. Joy Laking observes the world around her with attentiveness, passion and keen interest. Her ability to see distinguishes her as an exceptional artist as much as her obvious talent for drawing and composition and her mastery of the medium of watercolour.

It is fitting that an essay on Joy Laking’s painting and approach to her work should be published by the Robert Pope Foundation. Joy has served on the board of the Nova Scotia-based Robert Pope Foundation since 1997. This Foundation, bridging art and medicine, was set up as a service organization and a memorial to a dedicated and gifted artist, Robert Pope, who died of cancer in his early thirties.

Living life fully and dying with dignity were lessons Joy learned at home. “My mother was an artist and a major influence on my life. She died young — in

her early fifties, of breast cancer. She died just about the time when I was graduating from fine art at university and pondering my future. Her death was an incentive to me to take the risk and practice my art with passion and commitment. I decided not to put it off. She never knew that I became an artist too. I miss her every day.”

The novelist Virginia Woolf ended her novel *The Waves* with the declaration, “Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” Art is linked with life and death in a fundamental way. The best artists appear to break the bonds of time and space. E.M. Forster captured the glory and the immense labour of that creative effort, acclaiming Woolf’s novels as “trophies won by the mind from the matter, its enemy and its friend.”

Joy began striving for artistic ‘trophies’ at an early age. Making art was a family affair. On her mother’s side were generations of English jet carvers who carved the metamorphosed coal into buttons, broaches, crosses and funeral ornaments in Victorian England. Not only did her mother paint, but her father built marionette puppets and trains, tinted photographs and eventually began painting too. Both parents won art competitions as children and both had their paintings featured in the window of Eaton’s in Hamilton, Ontario. As a child, Joy thought all houses had an ‘art drawer’ in most rooms and was surprised to find, later, that not all houses came so well-equipped.

Her mother nurtured the creative process. She would set out materials and leave her three children to make their own way. As a child, Joy also accompanied her mother on frequent excursions to paint the Georgian Bay scenery. While she loved these trips, Joy was frustrated by the gulf between her own productions and her mother’s. “I always felt terribly inadequate. I couldn’t produce what I saw or what my mother could do. It didn’t please me.”

For the emerging artist this was perhaps an ideal environment: stimulation, encouragement and the bar set high. But another, more surprising influence shaped her development as a visual artist: poor eyesight. One day, in grade two, Joy carefully copied from the blackboard a set of math questions. She answered them perfectly. The only problem was that the questions in her notebook were

Singing in the Rain

watercolour

1989

29" x 20"





**Donalda's House
in Winter**

watercolour

1993

26" x 12"

not the questions written on the blackboard. Her teacher recommended that she get her eyes tested.

With new glasses on her nose, Joy gazed, enthralled, at a ravishing, unguessed-at, world. "I had always thought grass was a flat green. I was shocked to see individual blades of grass. Suddenly the world was revealed in astonishing focus and form, and I could see all the subtle colour changes. I wanted to look and look at the multi-hued richness of everything."

Perhaps this sudden awakening to the close-up world was the initial spur to a preoccupation informing her adult work: meticulous rendering of abundant detail. Every paint flake, stone fissure, seashell barnacle and flower petal is caught precisely.

It was easy for Joy, as a child, to lose herself in make-believe. She was born with a powerful imagination. The line between her daily world and the created world was very thin. "Sometimes my parents dressed the marionette puppets they made in clothes made from the same material as my own clothes. I recall a red plaid in particular. I regarded these puppets as my own relations."

As it turned out, the artist's keen imagination and intense absorption in her art helped ensure her survival through a difficult marriage.

In June 1999, when she was almost fifty, Joy leapt with a backpack from a wave-rocked boat on to the rocky cliffs of Quirpon Island, just off Newfoundland. She spent almost two weeks there, totally alone except for her paints and her journal. It was a pivotal time. In the silence and the daily conquering of fear — it was frigid, stormy, and the island was uninhabited — Joy was brought face to face with her own circumstances.

"The year before I left the marriage, I had twelve days on that island all alone. It snowed every day, and all I had was one book. I painted with freezing fingers through all the daylight hours, and I realized that I could survive alone."

She had married and moved from Ontario to Nova Scotia after graduating from the University of Guelph in 1972 with a degree in fine art. She and her

husband settled in Bass River on the shore of the Bay of Fundy in Colchester County. Between the years 1980 and 1985 they had three children: Kelsey, Danica and Yolande.

From the beginning, Joy chose to work with watercolor, in a realistic style. It was not a trendy choice in the 1970s, nor was it what she had studied at university where the focus was on acrylics and abstract art. But she wanted a healthy environment without the solvents and other chemicals associated with oils. And it was the physical world that inspired her to paint.

She did not warm to the Maritime scenery immediately. Growing up in Grey County, Ontario, Joy had lovingly absorbed the landscape of limestone rock, grey waves, rolling hills, pines and maples, and cedar swamps. “I lived that scenery. Perhaps you do internalize your first scenery no matter what it is, but the Georgian Bay landscape was deeply imprinted on me and I was in tune with and deeply inspired by the work of the Group of Seven.”

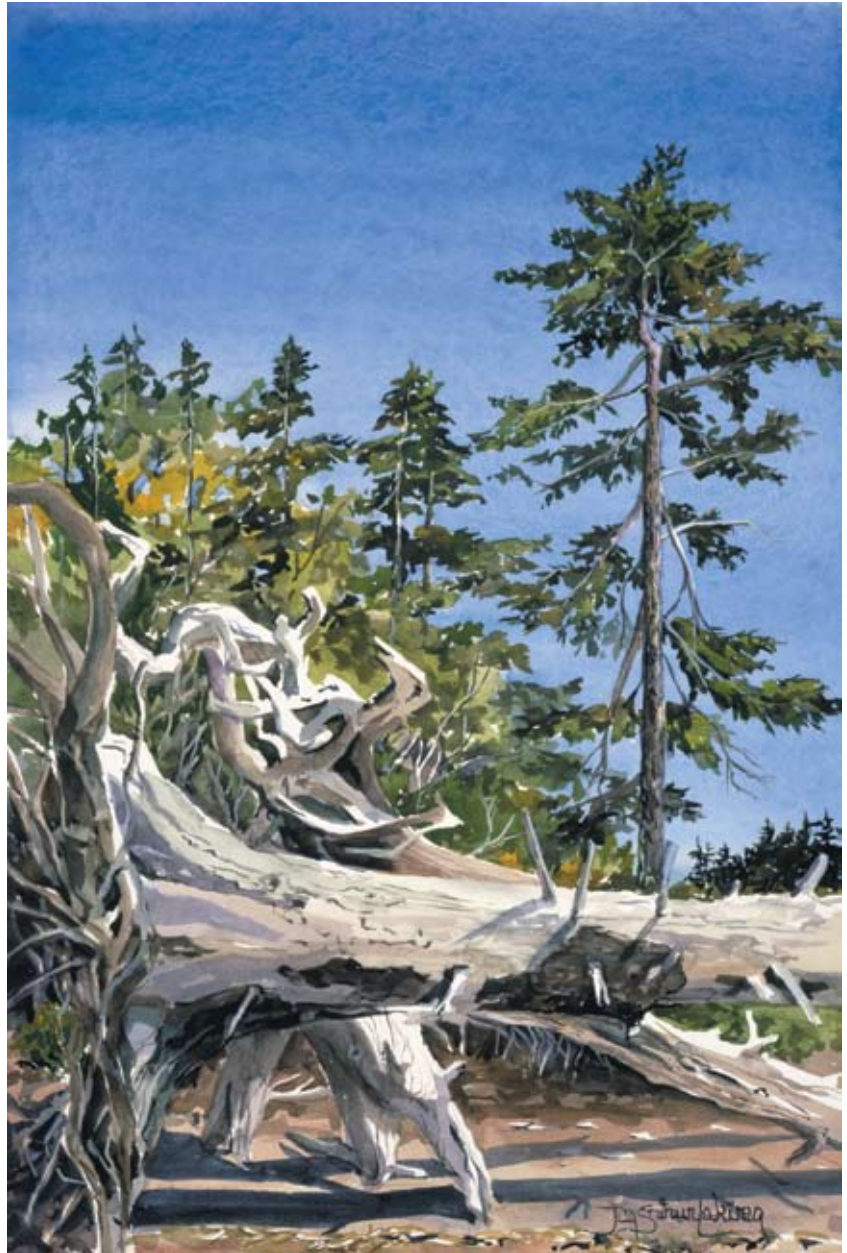
One day, searching for something to paint in her new province, she took her materials down to Peggy’s Cove to sketch a group of fishing men near their boats. She became engrossed in the scene, staying the whole day, watching and sketching men doing their routine chores and chatting. Missing friends and family from Ontario, she thought these people seemed ‘very friendly’.

“They were people as friendly shapes. I saw them as faceless, but really nice appealing shapes. I played with the shapes to make a pleasing composition and then I learned how to handle watercolour by just moving the paint around inside the shapes. I spent a year and a half doing an entire series — I called them the ‘potato people’. They helped me feel less lonely.”

But the artist’s inner landscape surfaced even in the midst of painting these friendly beings. “One of the paintings I did at that time was one of me in prison garb playing solitaire in a striped uniform with a number on it, and the number was the date of my mother’s death.”

Isolated in the country, and seeing very few people in those early days, Joy was vulnerable to the view that as an artist she was not really contributing; she might be just playing, with possibly nothing to show in the end. But sus-

**Driftwood at
Thomas Cove**
watercolour
2001
21” x 14”





Hinge

watercolour

2005

21" x 16"

tained by a core belief in the value of her art that went deeper than these fears, she carried on. Caring for her children also helped to give her a sense of purpose and increased her compassion and awareness.

“I loved mothering — and even home-schooled them all for a year. The children were important to my survival. We entertained each other. In my work, I painted ‘happy scenes’, creating a storybook world where everything was joyful, pretty and happy. My painting was an escape into another world. And plus, these ‘happy paintings’ were acceptable and would sell.”

Despite difficult domestic circumstances, Joy’s productivity over the next thirty years was remarkable, in both an artistic and a business sense. From the very beginning, she practiced her art with immense self-discipline. Rising about 4:45 a.m. every day for years, Joy’s routine was to stuff clothes in the washing machine and settle herself near the window in her studio by 5:00 a.m. What followed were four ‘blissful’ hours of uninterrupted work. At 9:00 a.m., she returned to the children and the business of selling, framing, wrapping and shipping her art.

While the children were preschoolers, she painted again during their ‘quiet time’ between 1:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. How did she manage to impose this discipline on three rambunctious children? “It was a matter of strict routine and the children accepted it.”

With this unceasing labour, Joy was able to support her family with her art. Painting was, and is, Joy Laking’s passion, but she accepted the trade-off required to make a living. In the early 1980s, Joy was asked to illustrate children’s books. She did two: *The Brook and the Woodcutter*, an early environmental warning, and *The Man Who Couldn’t Stop Sneezing*. While she enjoyed illustrating, it didn’t bring in enough money so she looked for other avenues to pay the bills, including a very popular series of calendars with twelve of her paintings from the year, and limited edition prints.

During her first years as a full-time artist, Joy made exquisite flower paintings. Ranging from apple blossoms to ladies slippers to snowdrops, the paintings are as closely detailed as botanical illustrations and reveal a delicacy of

line and colour, and remarkable technical virtuosity, particularly in handling white and pale pinks on white paper. In the mid-1980s, she created a series of winter works including white clapboard houses and white laundry blowing against white snow. Joy Laking's unique white-on-white technique remains an outstanding achievement.

Her winter paintings reveal a preoccupation with reflection and an ongoing dialogue between light and shade. Absorbed in the qualities of reflected light, and how to capture it in watercolour, Joy made many paintings of views seen through windows. Often glass bottles on the windowsill are included to add more dimensions to the light bouncing back to the eye. One of Joy's 'window' paintings, *Brigitte's Window*, was chosen as the cover for the 1985 Maritime Tel and Tel Directory.

Since Joy was self-taught in watercolours, she felt free to experiment to achieve the effects she wanted. Over time she developed a process of applying paint to get depth, tonal contrast and intense colour. "People think that watercolours have to be washed-out pastels. But they don't. Every layer of paint that the light has to go through before it hits the white paper muddies the colour. I discovered that if you put the darks in first in a single layer you will achieve maximum luminosity. Oftentimes, the light takes care of itself; a lot of it is white paper."

In the late 1980s, Joy and her husband built a gallery on to the Portau-pique house to display her paintings. Though the house was out of the way, Joy had become known in Nova Scotia by then and both locals and tourists found their way to the gallery.

In 1990, Joy Laking was invited to do a solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. The exhibition then toured for a year. This recognition by a provincial gallery was a remarkable tribute to an emerging artist. The honour gave her the confidence to stop accepting commissions and paint her own images.

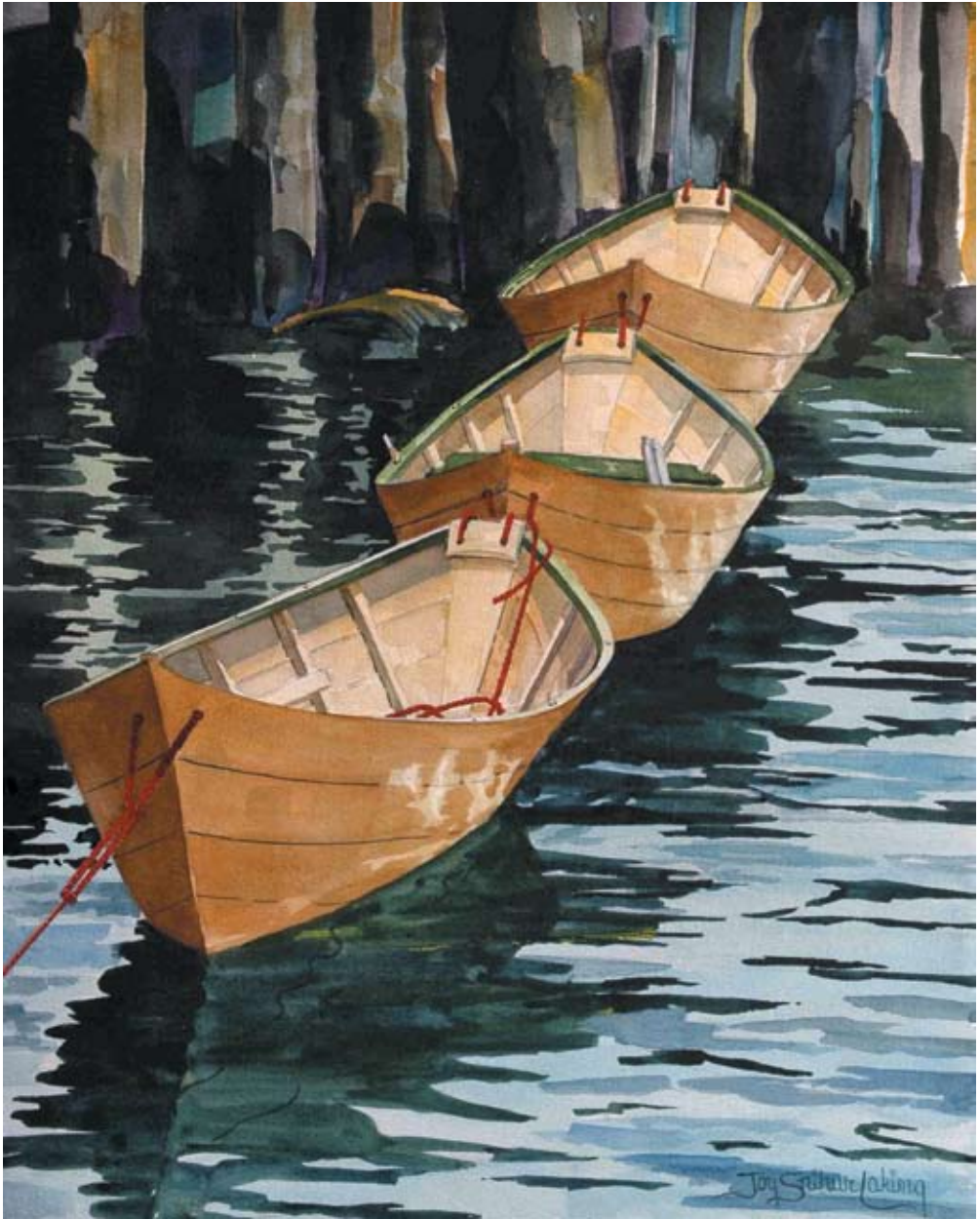
By then, she had internalized the Nova Scotia scenery and come to love it. Painting on location in the warmer months, she captured shoreline and seascape and was also drawn to houses, especially front doors with porches and

Dories

watercolour

2005

21" x 16"





Bait Bag

watercolour

2005

21" x 15"

inviting chairs. These paintings are saturated with domestic pleasure. In fact, flower-decked porches became signature pieces for the artist and were immensely successful. During this time she also spent a couple of months each year developing an image into a serigraph, a handmade silkscreen print.

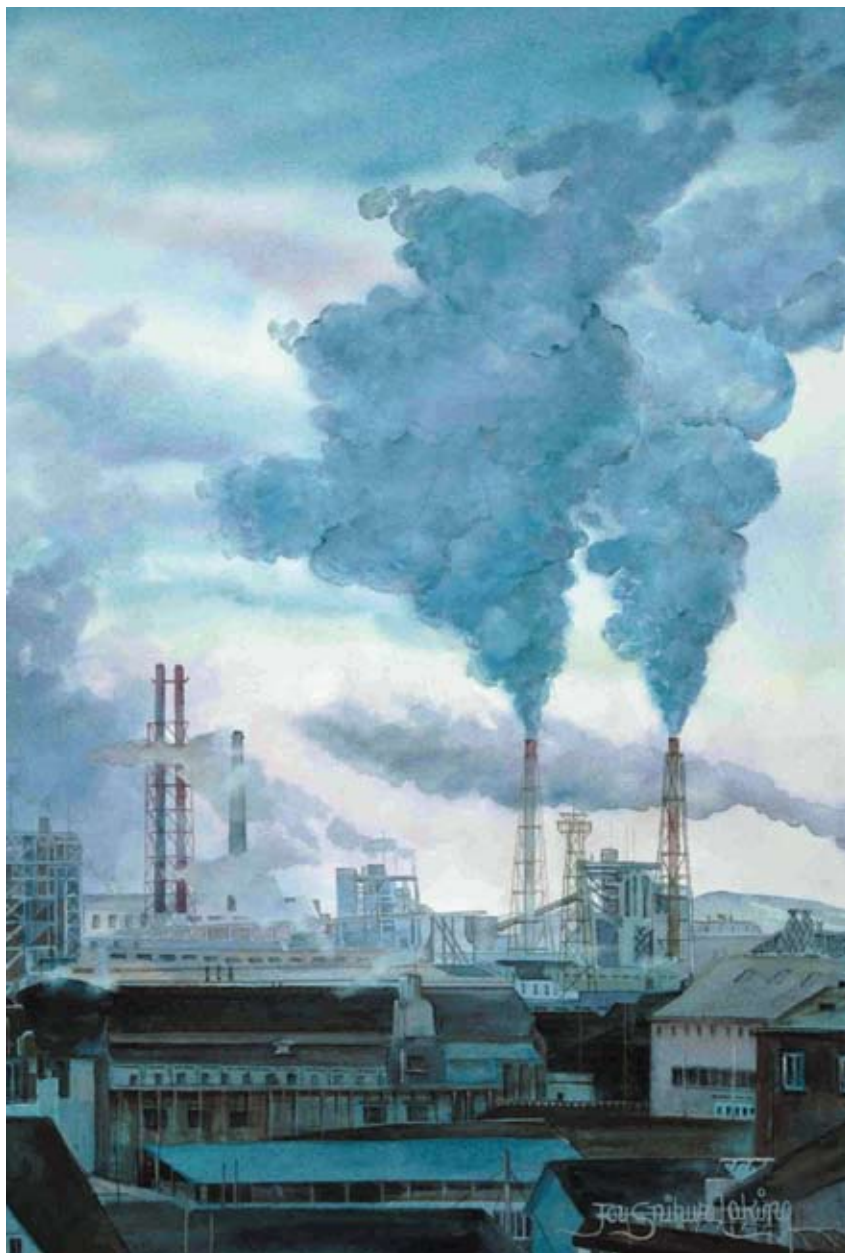
Joy sold from her own gallery, and in private art galleries (she was represented by Manuge Gallery and Zwickers Gallery in Halifax and Beckett Gallery in Hamilton, Ontario). In the ten years between 1982 and 1992 she held nine solo exhibitions and six group exhibitions.

Starting from the mid-1990s, she continued with group exhibitions and shows in her own gallery, and began to maintain a website and take online orders. Most years, she made at least seventy paintings. Each exhibition meant hours of work and each sale meant framing, packaging, accounting and all the other time-consuming tasks apart from painting itself.

“It is a horrible thing to have to stay alive with your art — to do your art and also pay the mortgage. I would just get started on something interesting and have to go back to tend to the gallery. In an ideal world, I wouldn’t care if any of my paintings were sold; I just like to do the work. Do the work and have them stack up. Maybe I would like to have an exhibit after a while, but only to see what they look like all together.”

For Joy Laking, the process of making a painting is the true pleasure; the activity itself completely absorbing. “Painting is a physical activity, but it is also a highly cerebral process. You are thinking and solving puzzles all the way along, but in a non-verbal way. Even before you begin, you have to have your composition — your plan — and you need to know where your tonal values are. You are utterly immersed in a world of composition and light and tone. If I’m painting indoors, the telephone can ring and I won’t even hear it. If I’m painting outside, and people are around and ask me questions, it takes a big effort to break my concentration and answer.”

Joy maintains a steady rhythm in her painting year. If the temperature is above freezing, she is usually outside, battered hat on head, searching for an



**Early Morning
in Japan**

watercolour

2006

21" x 16"

Weighing Fish

watercolour

2006

29" x 21"



image that catches her attention. When it does, she will unpack materials from her backpack, perch on her stool and start to work, often remaining in the same spot for the next six hours. These works ‘en plein air’ have a particularly engaging spontaneity and lightness.

In the winter, Joy works primarily in the studio using sketches or photos of the same scene from different angles. She will play with these images, rearranging them and looking to see if a composition for a painting might emerge. This process might take days, weeks or, if the emerging image is especially compelling, months. She does not usually know why the odd image strikes her so profoundly. In these cases, she might remain with the image through a process extending from a sketch composed from several photos, to a 5” x 7” watercolour, to a larger watercolour or (less often) acrylic, to a painting as large as 3’ x 4’. Often the image gets more generalized, less realistic, as it gets bigger.

In 2007, in a new marriage, having surmounted a serious health issue, and inspired by recent travels, Joy is experiencing what she describes as an ‘explosion of creativity’ ranging from painting and photography to rug-hooking, wool dyeing, acrylics, oil painting and even beach glass work. In fact, an exhibition in January 2007, “Here and Away — Seeing with Passionate Eyes” in Truro, Nova Scotia, is a photography exhibition, mounted jointly with a fellow traveler, and photographer, Laurie Gunn. Joy proposed this dual exhibition to demonstrate how photographs taken in the same place at the same time by different artists reflect the unique spirit of each.

Confident in her ability to select compelling images, Joy’s photographs are exuberant and, like her paintings, rich in colour. Unlike her paintings, though, some of her best photographs feature people. She captures the essence of a person, often in movement, in his or her setting. Even in close-up, her subjects seem oblivious to the photographer, revealing their unique selves.

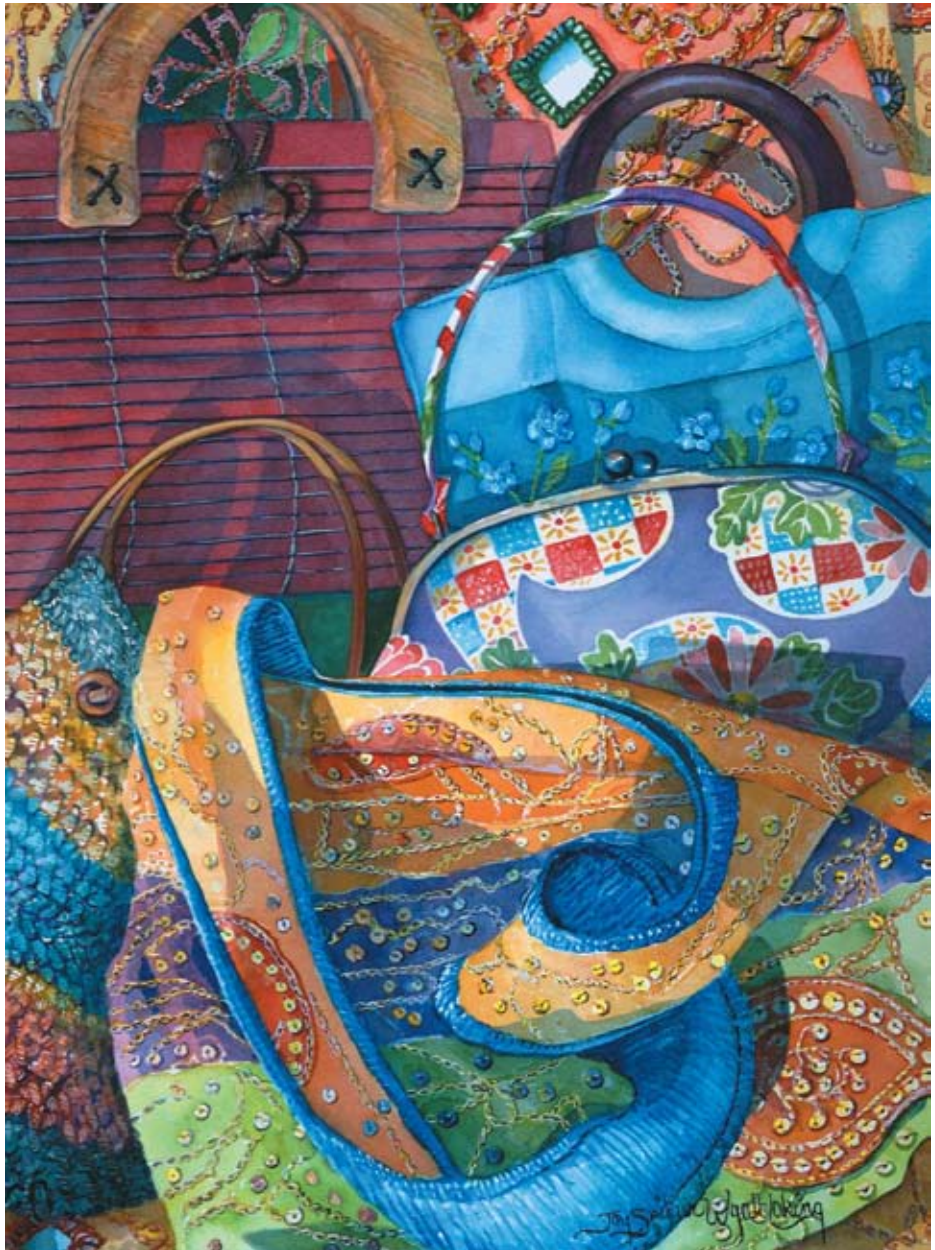
Despite her interest in everything creative, Joy remains dedicated to developing further as a painter and believes that her work is more serious than ever before. International travel has enriched her artistically, introducing her especially to new facets of light and colour. “Before I painted in Italy, I tended to

Handles

watercolour

2007

21” x 15”





Orchids

watercolour

2007

21" x 16"

avoid yellows. After three weeks of painting there, I returned home so enamored of yellow tones that I painted my dining room in raw sienna.”

In her most recent paintings, form and colour dominate the identity of the object painted. The colours are getting stronger, the subjects simplified, and the composition more abstract or sometimes hyper-realistic. For the viewer, these paintings with their bold lines and rich colours are a visual feast.

To progress as an artist takes courage and determination, particularly when the path leads away from an established and popular style. Every new work is a plunge into the unknown and may fail. “It seems to be part of the creative process that in every piece there is a stage — usually about two-thirds of the way through the painting — where I feel it isn’t going to work. I think, I’m just making wallpaper. It’s mediocre and I should give up. It happens every time. But I am pig-headed enough to push on and usually it all comes together and I can finish.”

Joy Laking exemplifies the independence of mind and stamina required to succeed as an artist, whatever the buying public thinks. “As an artist you have to believe in yourself. You have to not care what people say because no matter what they say it may not be the right thing. You have to have courage to go against the tide. The only thing that matters is how I feel about a painting. I only get a few that really work in my opinion. I produce some mediocre ones that most people think are wonderful. The worst of it is that of the four best paintings I have done in the last couple of years — in fact that I have ever done — three remain unsold.”

As usual, we, the viewers, lag behind the artist who sees what we do not. Forging ahead with renewed creativity, Joy Laking is taking her public to new and unknown places and it takes time for us to catch up. But it is certain that this outstanding Canadian artist is set to win more gleaming ‘trophies’ from the world she sees with passionate eyes.