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ELISSA BARNARD

Tom Forrestall: Finding the Vision

by Elissa Barnard

Tom Forrestall's parents never questioned their son's wisdom in wanting to pursue art. Tom explains, "Around the old house in Middleton there were old books, reproductions of Titian and Rembrandt. Their attitude was if Rem-brandt can be an artist, Tom can be an artist. None of 'you'll starve'. I don't think they realized how economically difficult art-making is. I'm glad they didn't."

Born March 11, 1936, in Middleton, Nova Scotia, Forrestall is one of Canada's top realist painters. His precise and haunting egg tempera paintings of figures, the coast and the land are in homes and public collections throughout Canada and abroad.

It wasn't easy to raise six kids on an artist's earnings or to find his vision as a painter, but Forrestall is a determined, highly disciplined man. He also had help. First encouraged by his parents, he won a scholarship in 1954 to Mount Allison University, in Sackville, N.B., the school that was and still is a centre for Atlantic Canadian realism. Two life-altering events awaited him there. He met his mentor, Alex Colville, the biggest influence on his work, and he met the love of his life, Natalie LeBlanc, an art student from Atholville, N.B.

"Meeting Natalie made my life complete," he says. "After our marriage in 1958, Natalie ran the art business and the household. She managed things extremely well and it never rattled her with all these six kids. We just had faith that something would work out and it did, and Natalie made it possible for me to paint. For forty-eight years I dedicated all my paintings to Natalie. Her love and guiding hand delivered us through good times and bad."

After graduating from Mount Allison in 1958, Forrestall received one of the first Canada Council grants for independent study and travel. (Coincidentally, folklorist Dr. Helen Creighton, who lived in Evergreen, a house situated kitty corner to Forrestall's Albert Street home in Dartmouth, also received one that year. "We used to joke about that," Tom said.)

Tom and Natalie set out for Europe bicycling to cities and small towns to see all the art they could. When they returned she was pregnant.

The young couple moved to Fredericton where Forrestall was interviewed by Lord Beaverbrook for a job as assistant curator at the newly opened Beaverbrook Art Gallery. (Forrestall testified in the fall of 2006 at the Beaverbrook tribunal that the gallery's collection, whose ownership is disputed by Beaverbrook's British grandchildren, was not a loan but Lord Beaverbrook's "almighty gift" to the people of his native New Brunswick.)

The Power Station
1994
watercolour

collection of the artist

After a few months at the gallery, Forrestall worked as an editorial cartoonist at *The Daily Gleaner*, published by Brigadier Michael Wardell, a friend of Lord Beaverbrook's. "I liked it but I found I couldn't paint at all. The whole psyche of how you think for an editorial cartoon is totally different. I was a painter, it was in my blood," Tom said.

He went to the bank to borrow $9,500 to buy a set of five apartments that would give the young couple rental income. As soon as he told them he was an artist they turned him down. Forrestall told Brigadier Wardell what had happened and Tom believes Wardell got in touch with Lord Beaverbrook. He comments, "You never hear directly from Beaverbrook but in the afternoon I got a call from the bank." The Forrestalls received the loan that would give them economic stability and give Tom a place to paint. They were able to pay it off fairly quickly and Tom wrote a note to Beaverbrook to thank him for his help.

The apartment building had housed the Dunbar Bakery. "It was a dump, but it was our dump," says Forrestall, "It gave me a huge studio because the back part of the building was where they had made bread."

It was there in 1961 that he painted his landmark work, *Alexander College*, a winter scene of low-lying, derelict barracks in blues, browns and white.

Alexander College
1961
oil on masonite

collection of the artist

"There's a lot of Lawren Harris Sr. in this painting," says Forrestall, gesturing to the cold blues and the snow. (As a student he saw huge Harris canvases in the home of Lawren P. Harris, director of Mount A's fine art school and son of Group of Seven painter Lawren S. Harris.) The surface texture is less thick than in his earlier work, though not yet as smooth and highly finished as his later egg tempera masterpieces. With Alexander College, he felt he had turned a corner. He explains, "I had just been using gobs of paint which I liked but it didn't seem to have the emotion of the place." Holding up the painting to point to ridges of white paint, he adds, "There are still some gobs of paint." However, this is the first painting in which he felt he made a leap "from decoration to human emotion."

Emotion became more important than decoration, and emotion lay in the details. Forrestall, who writes on the back of his paintings analyzing their development, has written on the back of *Alexander College*, ". . . the grain of wood, every blade of grass, every pebble on the beach had value and took its place in the 'idea'." After finishing this painting his thinking was clearer and his work would take a totally different direction.

Forrestall's attic studio in his 30-room, 1906 home in Dartmouth is a sprawling space with an easel in one corner and paintings and watercolours everywhere — on the floor, on the walls and in wooden storage slots. There is an election poster for his late brother, Senator Mike Forrestall, a plastic skeleton and an old propeller from a junkyard. It is here that Forrestall concocts his startling though familiar rural, urban and domestic images from four ingredients: drawings, written ideas, watercolours and the ancient medium of egg tempera.

His ideas evolve through constant writing and drawing in a black-bound sketchbook that goes everywhere with him. In a corner of his home gallery in the 100-year-old house where he and Natalie raised their family there is a giant, glass-paned cabinet full of hundreds of the black-covered sketchbooks.

Forrestall's love for art started with a fascination for drawing. His father, a skilled finishing carpenter, studied carpentry in Boston and had a natural ability to draw. "Maybe because he was a carpenter, he understood mass and dimension," says Forrestall. "I remember as a kid he had a big piece of paper and

a carpenter's pencil and he'd draw. It was a marvel to see that line trail out of the pencil and become a train or a giraffe."

Forrestall drew as a child. Feeling somewhat isolated due to ill health in his youth, art was "something to grab hold of."

When the family moved from Middleton to Dartmouth during the Second World War he had a chance to study art. He fondly remembers his excitement as a boy, from the ages of 10 to 12, taking the ferry from Dartmouth to Halifax for Saturday morning art classes at the Nova Scotia College of Art, then at the corner of Argyle and George Streets in a building that today houses the Five Fishermen Restaurant. "I passed the junior course in painting at the Nova Scotia College of Art and got a certificate for my efforts. I'm on the board of directors now," he says wryly. (Today the college is known as NSCAD University.)

The Startled Witness
1998
egg tempera on masonite

collection of the artist

Drawing is how Forrestall experiences what is happening to him and others in the world. When his beloved wife was ill in Dartmouth General Hospital, Forrestall sketched her head on the pillow as she looked warmly at him. "While I made drawing after drawing day after day I witnessed Natalie disappear before my eyes. Drawing always has been an incredible emotional experience for me," he says. "Drawing, I find, it's very, very important to me and it develops things so much for me. I draw to fill my head and I paint to empty it."

Forrestall distrusts photography as a way to record experience preferring to paint watercolours. They are "the most pleasurable side of painting," he says, "because you go to the real place, mostly outdoors and sit down and you run it through your senses. The place soaks into you in a big way. Out of it comes a certain poetry," says Forrestall, citing Ted Pulford, his first-year teacher at Mount A, as an influence on his watercolours. He states, "Photography has a strange effect on things. It has a curious perfection that isn't human, the colour isn't real, it's chemicals. The true real comes from experience."

In July, 2006, after the death of Natalie, Forrestall painted a watercolour in deep, warm browns of a view through a doorway into the dining room of the 1815 house he's owned for forty years in Upper Clements. Hanging above the

kitchen doorway is a cross, placed there by Natalie. Forrestall wrote on the back in large capital letters: "Natalie's little cross over her kitchen door she hung there many years ago — true to her Acadian roots, it shall hang there while I'm still around."

This study joined others on the studio floor. As he tramps around, they get kicked about a good deal. Then two or more disparate images come together. He says, "I never find the whole thing all there at once. I find one part. It's always a gut feeling. Something in my mind's eye builds and it gets very convincing. I should do it."

The Dinner Hour
2006
egg tempera on masonite

collection of the artist

Forrestall combined the Upper Clements watercolour with a pre-existing watercolour of his wristwatch and outstretched hand, a motif he's used before, for his 2006 painting *The Dinner Hour*. The watch and hand loom large in the foreground with a view to the cross above the doorway and into the dining room. Many details of the real scene have been pared down and the remaining objects of a candlestick on the table, a cross above the door and overturned bowls like military helmets at the top of a tall cabinet have an added gravity in the sparse, quiet space. The painting is silvery blueish grey, colder and more detached than the watercolour. This is partly due to the medium of egg tempera which he says gives a drier, dustier effect.

Over the last forty years Forrestall has spent hundreds of dollars on eggs for his art and, he jokes, "I've never written them off in my taxes." He was introduced to egg tempera by Alex Colville and he returned to it in 1963. He says, "For some reason it twigged with me. I don't know if it was the way Alex taught it. He did use egg tempera himself and I've always admired Alex."

Egg tempera was used by the Egyptians, perfected by Byzantine Empire iconographers and early Renaissance painters before the 15th century Flemish painters "invented" oil paint, and was revived in the 20th century by British and American painters. It is one of the cheapest, simplest and most direct media for art-making, "and with its own character is most beautiful," says Forrestall. In his case, he cracks open an egg, isolates the yolk and adds pigment. "There is always a big debate over whether white or brown eggs are better. I think there is a con-

sensus it doesn't matter."

He uses increasingly smaller brushes to apply the fast-drying paint in tiny flicks of colour similar to, though less pixellated than, pointillism for an amazing surface detail. "It's almost pointillism. I did a lot of study of Seurat and I love Seurat. Here I've got dots of green next to a pinky colour," he says, touching the surface of *Time of the Storm*. "It's a bit of Impressionism in a tiny way. When the painting is first done you could almost take a feather and scratch it, it's so delicate. After a while, it's on like a plate. An oil painting will show its age, an egg tempera looks better as it ages," he says. What other media lack is its "luminosity and opalescence."

Time of the Storm
2004
egg tempera on masonite

collection of the artist

Forrestall starts an egg tempera painting using the Old Masters technique of separating drawing and painting. He first does a study in India ink on masonite concentrating on drawing and tone. "The India ink dries waterproof and it forms a kind of skeleton. Then I concentrate on the colour. At first I put colour on with big brushes, then bit by bit the brushes get smaller and smaller. It's done that way to stay with it longer and longer. They always get hung up somewhere.""

If the watercolours are pure pleasure, the egg tempera masterpieces are where he does battle, reaching for a vision he knows he can't perfect. "Every painting has a struggle in it. You can often see the struggle and I find that's good. It means you've gone all the way to the wall with it. It's a good idea to be hard on yourself, to push yourself to the limit. If you're creating art it's a given you're going to go the country mile."

As Forrestall moves away from the reality and details in the drawings and watercolours to his final egg tempera image, something happens. He explains, "The painting evolves as a thing in itself, not a record of a real place. Something creeps in that is beyond one's understanding. When the watercolour is done I'm riveted to the real place." Looking at *The Dinner Hour*, he says, "As a painting evolves the real place fades away, the real kitchen, even my hand becomes insignificant and the painting takes over. Up to halfway I feel I'm in charge and suddenly it's telling me what to do. By the time you get to the final

work you hardly know the place." Forrestall keeps in his home gallery and above his kitchen door an enlarged, printed quotation by early 20th century French poet Pierre Reverdy that he has given to all his children, five of whom are artists, most seriously William in Fredericton and Renée in Halifax.

Reverdy writes: "The image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot arise from a comparison but from the *rapprochement* of two more or less distant realities. The more the two realities which are brought together are remote and accurate, the stronger the image will be — the more it will have emotive power and poetic reality."

Island in the Ice
1987
egg tempera on masonite

collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. Acquisition made possible with funds provided by Christopher Ondaatje, Toronto, Ontario, 1994.

The 1995 painting *Beach in the Morning*, an arresting image of two young women standing motionless by a smouldering fire at dawn, is a composite of different realities. "There was a fire on the beach," says Forrestall. "It was not early morning. It was never that still. The two figures of the two girls have come back to the site the next day. Who knows? Maybe they've lost an earring and one of the girls is looking at the smoke."

Unusually, Forrestall's intense image of a crouched girl on the beach looking into the night sky in the painting *The Beach At Night*, a work that recalls William Blake's powerful, spiritual imagery, was not derived from reality. "It's entirely made up, there's no model, no real beach. I sometimes like something that comes totally out of your imagination. It's not realistic, the figure is quite deformed."

Forrestall's monumental, spooky painting *Island in the Ice* was inspired by a weather phenomenon when ice floes came right into Halifax Harbour. "I've gone down to Hartlen Point and looked at the island many times. When I saw it surrounded by ice suddenly it became very isolated and very cut off." Forrestall has previously painted chain link fences and blockaded roads. "That fascinated me, the fact something was cut off. You couldn't get off the island or get on it."

Forrestall likes an edge of mystery in his images, but leaves the exact interpretation of symbols and storyline up to the viewer. Some of his paintings are alarming with eerily suspended balls and arrows, shards of broken glass or garbage blowing on a suburban street by an abandoned car. These images, in

their incongruity, stillness and psychological charge, are akin to magic realism, a term often used to define Alex Colville's art.

Other images are less sinister outdoor or domestic scenes still fraught with a mystery. That mystery may be disquieting, whimsical or spiritual but it is always compelling. Art Gallery of Nova Scotia senior curator Ray Cronin says there is no unified Atlantic realist school of painting though terms of magic realism and high realism have been bandied about over the years. He defines Forrestall as an Atlantic realist in terms of his location and schooling. "He comes from a particular kind of high realism that comes from Mount Allison with the influence of Alex Colville as the main factor. Alex Colville and Lawren P. Harris and Ted Pulford were the people that created a situation through which a whole generation of realist painters came to the fore." Those painters include Christopher and Mary Pratt, fellow students and friends of Tom's and Natalie's, and Forrestall.

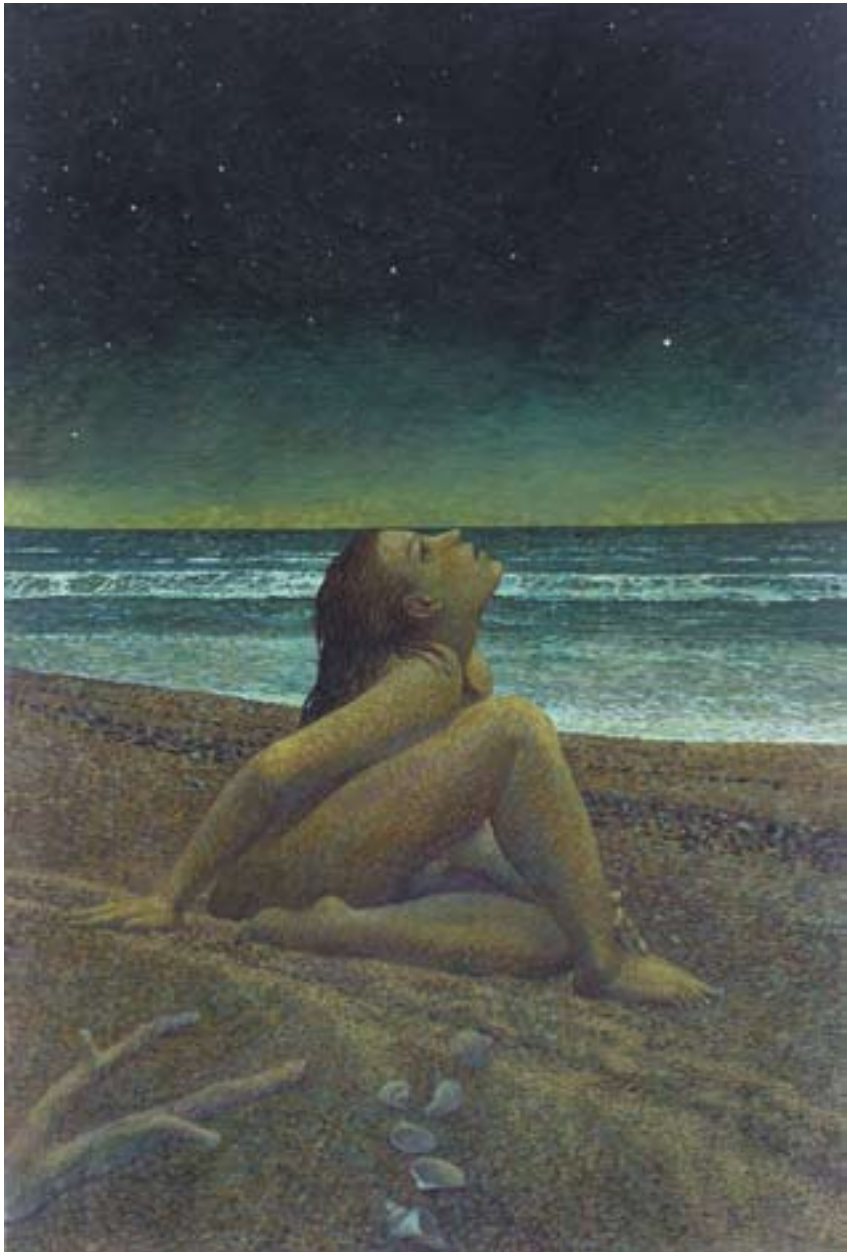
Beach in the Morning
1994
egg tempera on masonite

collection of the artist

Atlantic realism is "more of a geographic description" and a term "for curatorial and art historical convenience," says Cronin, coordinator of the 2008 Forrestall retrospective at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. "The four main figures — Colville, Mary Pratt, Chris Pratt and Tom — they all have very different styles. All four use small brushes to make minute marks for meticulously crafted surfaces but they do not share a recognizable style or palette," says Cronin. "Colville's style comes out of a more existential, surrealist thing if you look at the work of the 1950s. He was looking at Renaissance painting and distilled moments with psychological content. Mary Pratt's work is about photography and domestic spaces. Christopher Pratt is more interested, like Colville, in the sense of creating psychologically-charged paintings and moments. He's much more geometric, I'd argue."

Like Colville and the Pratts, Forrestall draws on his daily life and environment for subject matter. "Wherever you choose to live you draw the universal out of that area. It's not regional or backwater, it's what you make of it," he says. "I create a universal from what's at hand."

Cronin sees the ticking of the clock in Forrestall's images. "His work is



really about memory and loss and trying to capture moments as they disappear. There is a sense of time passing."

Forrestall and his wife Natalie, an Acadian, raised their children in the Catholic church. At midnight mass on Christmas Eve of 2006 the manger at St. Mary's Basilica, erected in the Halifax church for the last fifteen years by the Forrestall family, was dedicated to Natalie. Forrestall's grandfather established the first Catholic church in Middleton, in the middle of the Annapolis Valley, in the little-used "East" room of his home. The artist remembers peeking through the doors as a child.

A Beach at Night
1996 / 97
egg tempera on masonite

collection of the artist

"One of the things I think is very central to his work is the fact he is a very devout Catholic," says Cronin. "There is a spiritual element in his work, the sense of the world being something that is infused with meaning, the fact that there is grace in the world, that things mean something, that there is a presence. He's a very committed and passionate artist but he's a very modest man. The work is a lot more complicated than people think it is. There's a lot more going on."

Forrestall is more down-to-earth and less analytical about his work. He likes to oversize ordinarily small things like eyes to confront a viewer and "open up a whole new world." He does purposely use the recurring motif of the hand and the watch to "set up a tension." However, "I don't really try to figure it out. A painting can be more riveting if it's not fully understood."

He again juxtaposed his hand with his watch in a large canvas of his house in the February, 2004, snowstorm nicknamed White Juan. Following on the heels of the 2003 Hurricane Juan, this storm deluged the Halifax area with a record-breaking 95 centimetres of snow over 24 hours and kept side streets in hip-high snow for days. Forrestall loved it. He used a magnifying glass to study the sticky snowflakes falling on his dark coat sleeve and he paints them large and lazy.

The hand with the watch in the foreground of *Time of the Storm* gives way to a distant view of the large Albert Street house where Forrestall has lived since 1972. It's a house he loves "for its countless memories of Natalie and I and

our six children" and in this painting it is an object of safety and warmth. By placing it far away and smaller than the hand Forrestall reminds the viewer that the house, like all of us, is vulnerable.

"There were so many birthday parties at Albert Street that sometimes the decorations never came down," says Forrestall. His image of a kid's birthday party is far removed from the action and chaos of the event. He painted the balloons attached to a ceiling fan. He stalls the moment, makes it non-specific, elevates the balloons into an object for individual contemplation. Is it before or after the party? Time is stopped, in the same way that Colville and Christopher Pratt isolate a still moment, heavy with what's left unsaid, with what's about to happen or has happened.

The Lumber Dealers
1976
egg tempera on masonite

collection of the artist

Forrestall ceaselessly experiments with subject matter and with the size and shapes of his paintings. On the Bend, a painting of a derelict car at a Nova Scotia beach, has an actual bend inwards at the horizon line. The 1976 painting *The Lumber Dealers* is like a giant pair of glasses of two framed circles. One contains a highly-detailed woodpile, the other the enlarged faces of a man and a woman (Tom and Natalie), staring directly and somewhat harshly at the viewer. Now a somewhat sinister, ambiguous image, it was derived from the everyday —a trip Tom and Natalie made to buy wood. Forrestall finds the "creative dynamics" of working with shapes fascinating. "Why put a rectangle in a rectangle? You could do that with your eyes closed."

Forrestall has made a living pursuing his passion with "a singularity of purpose." If his parents thought art was a noble calling, Colville showed him how to live as an artist. "What I liked about Alex is he lived a normal life and he had a family and he lived in the community," says Forrestall. "It was a very positive thing. You draw your art out of the community. He imparted that it was a gift to be an artist, that you had something to offer."

Like Colville, Forrestall has exhibited widely in Canada, the United States and internationally, particularly in Eastern Europe, England, Italy and Tel Aviv.

A member of the Order of Canada and the Royal Canadian Academy of Art, he has donated his art over forty years to "good and worthy causes." He has

designed the Hope Cottage Christmas card, created a lithograph in Milan in 1988 to raise money for the Canadian Progress Club and held an exhibition in aid of the Dartmouth General Hospital.

It was his idea to record the wreckage of Swissair Flight 111 assembled for investigators inside a shed at CFB Shearwater. The plane crashed off Peggy's Cove on Sept. 2, 1998, killing all 229 people aboard. Forrestall, then working on the RCMP's 125th anniversary painting at RCMP H Division, was often alone as he drew. "In the cockpit I was never in such a quiet and a noisy place. It was very emotional, it was haunting to think of what went on." His drawing of the partially reconstructed captain's seat is one of the series' most powerful images. (H Division donated the twelve pen and ink drawings to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia.)

Captain's Seat
2000
watercolour and gouache over ink on paper

collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. A gift of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, "H" Division, Bedford, Nova Scotia, 2003.

Forrestall's commissions have included a 1964 bronze portrait for a Fredericton memorial of John F. Kennedy (the plaster is now in the Kennedy Library in Massachusetts), a welded metal sculpture for Expo '67 of farm equipment from homesteads about to be flooded for the Mactaquac dam, a 16-foot long mural of HMCS Assiniboine ramming a German submarine in 1942 for the wardroom at CFB Halifax Officers Mess, Stadacona, and a portrait of Pierre Elliott Trudeau's sons. It was commissioned by the federal government upon Trudeau's retirement and based on dozens of photographs sent by Margaret Trudeau. "He always told me that was his favourite painting. Whenever we had exhibitions in Montreal Pierre would come and stay the evening."

No project is too big or too small for a professional artist, says Forrestall. "I would always take whatever job came my way. If someone came up and wanted their Pekinese painted on a velvet cushion I'd do it. I wouldn't have snubbed them. That's what one is trained to do. It's not beneath your dignity — if you can turn it into a work of art."

The two deadly poisons for an artist are "formula" and "overconfidence," he says. "If you chase a vision, you're chasing the best you can do. If you don't have that vision you fall back into a formula. There is vision in my mind and eye with every painting. I don't know how I'm going to do it. The vision has a perfection beyond one which is good. I reach for something that is