



WHAT SHE KNOWS BEST

PHOTO: JOHN SNELGROVE

Through all the distractions of life, Warfield artist Jennifer Smith always comes back to painting

Rows and rows of exotic cacti stand at attention along the white studio wall. Across the small room you find French doors that open out to birch trees and a colourful leaf-covered yard of Warfield. Another wall is taken up by a huge canvas that hosts a work in progress, an extremely detailed realistic landscape that lives in harmony with the natural surroundings of the studio. This is the home and workplace of artist Jennifer Smith.

The only other piece of art in this well-used studio is a poster of Frida Kahlo with a number of parrots in her arms and resting on her shoulder. Although their work is very different, this Canadian artist shares much with the passionate Mexican painter, including a love of birds. In fact, when Jennifer is not painting, she is busy raising over one hundred exotic and endangered parrots (with her business Parrots Aplenty), a few of which are chirping away in the background as we



Previous page:
Jennifer Smith with
18-year-old Tiny, a
Moluccan cockatoo,
in front of a work in
progress.

Above:
"Moss with 3 Red
Flowers," 36" x 54",
oil on canvas.

talk. When asked why she doesn't paint these animals she is so passionate about, she explains, "They are so stream-lined; it wouldn't make for a very interesting painting. I'd have to paint them with their wings open, from a photograph. And I don't really want to do that. Who knows, maybe someday I will paint them."

For now, Jennifer is busy taking inspiration from natural landscapes that surround us here in the Kootenays. An avid hiker, skier, and former technical climber, she explains, "The outdoors has always been what inspired me to create art."

While exploring the wilds of B.C., she often brings a camera along, and it is from these photographs of little-known lakes and unnamed peaks that she paints. After sifting through hundreds of images, she prints out the slides that she wants to work from.

"Although slides are certainly a part of it... and photographs make a terrific

reference, there are always going to be points at which I have to put them away and work directly from the objects themselves."

Her cupboards are overflowing with seashells, strips of bark, Spanish moss, and other natural artifacts that she has used as references for the details. When doing paintings of a marsh, for instance, she had her bathtub full of live lily pads and bulrushes floating in water for over a month.

Working from both the slides and raw materials, she then alters the composition and its colours. The results are striking works that focus on a specific area of detail, such as an icy river or the reflection in a temporary pool. By magnifying the minute details of nature, she brings an entirely new meaning to the landscape, allowing it to take on a beauty of its own.

Born in England and raised in Ontario, Jennifer explains how she started to paint.

"I always wanted to do it, but as a teenager I didn't know it was possible. I didn't think you could be a professional artist. I understood it to be only a hobby, so I went to university, like I was supposed to, and got a Bachelor of Science in Biology. By my last year I knew that something was not quite right, yet I'd come so far, I figured I'd finish the degree before pursuing my art."

Soon after she'd graduated, Jennifer was headed to art school. An artist friend recommended that she study in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico at a school made famous decades earlier by Diego Rivera and the Mexican muralists. Unfortunately, it wasn't the romantic, creative institution she'd hoped to find, so after a year she continued her Bachelors of Fine Art at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, during which time she also studied at Cooper Union in New York City as an exchange student. She recalls fondly living for two dollars a night in the

art lofts provided by the school.

"Those were the days," she chuckles.

Her courses included printmaking, animation, photography and film, but she always came back to oil painting.

"I love the gutsy feel and the brilliance of colours. It's the immediacy that I love. I always come back to painting. Always."

She spent her summers at the Banff School of Fine Art, where all the best artists were teaching at the time. She thinks back with a smile, "It was the 1970s, and everyone was very into painting stripes. They'd put masking tape on the canvas, paint a colour, peel it off, and it was art. I couldn't believe that everyone was doing the same thing."

She recalls often having been considered the "black sheep" with her representational style which was shunned during this time period.

"They didn't approve of my working from photographs," Jennifer continues. "They considered it sacrilege."

She explains that it wasn't respected until it was discovered that even the greats in Rome had been working from set images.

Despite her commitment to becoming a professional artist, Jennifer quickly learned it wasn't easy, painting initially for three years without selling enough work to make ends meet. Soon after this period, Jennifer read about the famous architect Le Corbusier who explained that he had always wanted to be an artist, but in order to support himself he had to become an architect. He divided his day in half: the mornings were dedicated to his own art, and in the afternoon he made his living practicing architecture.

Inspired by Le Corbusier's life, Jennifer decided to go back to school for a degree in architecture. She spent four years at UBC, earning her architecture degree and working as an apprentice to various architects during the summers. However, Jennifer once again felt her art pulling her away from a different career.

"By the end, I realized that there was no way I could do what Le Corbusier did. Things in the field were radically different [then]. If I wanted to make it as an architect, I'd have to work full-time."

So with another degree in her pocket, Jennifer sold her Vancouver condo and moved to the Kootenays to raise birds and paint full-time, producing an average of twelve paintings a year.




Unfortunately, Jennifer also shares one more commonality with Frida Kahlo. Over the last ten years she has suffered from severe medical problems that have prevented her from being able to paint. She explains her relationship to the Frida looking over her shoulder as she paints,

"I look to her for inspiration in my time of physical trials, for she painted for over twenty years with severe pain due to spinal deformities and a streetcar accident before it became too much and she had to commit suicide."

Fortunately, Jennifer's medical issues have recently subsided, and she's again back to that which she loves most, painting.

Jennifer has been represented by the Bau-xi Gallery in Vancouver, and has had several very successful shows at that location and at their satellite galleries in Toronto and Seattle. For the next year and half, she will be preparing for a show in Whistler during the 2010 Winter Olympic Games while at the same time making plans to expand her home studio. She hopes this expansion will allow her to experiment with wood and soapstone sculpture, a medium she has been inspired by since architecture school, but she quickly admits, "I'll always come back to oil painting. Painting is what I know. It's what I do."

Jennifer's work is currently on display at Rossland's Rouge Gallery on Columbia Avenue. Stop in to check out her work and that of other local artists. 



PHOTOS COURTESY JENNIFER SMITH

From top:
"Logarithms," 36" x 54",
"Roots and Blues," 36" x 48",
Jennifer with "Send in the Clouds," 52" x 52".
All paintings are oil on canvas.