

Homeward bound; Peter Gough uses landscape to speak about history and identity, the scenes coloured with what he calls 'the pigment of the imagination.'

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Abstract:

"The map is not the territory," he says, quoting Ray Cronin, director and CEO of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, from the foreword of *From Land and Sea*, a new book about landscape art in Nova Scotia that includes Gough's work. Nova Scotia, practically surrounded by the sea, feels almost like an island to Gough, while, to him, the dominant feature of New Brunswick is its extensive, storied river systems.

Full text:

Peter Gough puts GPS co-ordinates on the back of each painting so that anyone who owns one of his landscapes can go to the very spot that inspired the work, although they shouldn't expect to find the scene exactly as it appears on the canvas.

"The map is not the territory," he says, quoting Ray Cronin, director and CEO of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, from the foreword of *From Land and Sea*, a new book about landscape art in Nova Scotia that includes Gough's work.

"Landscape painting is essentially a fiction ... Fictions, of course, are stories, and in a way, that is what these works are: stories about specific places, whether real or imagined, places that are altered in the re-telling, that reveal as much about the tellers as they do about the tales," he reads on.

"That is so true," Gough says, during a recent interview from his home and studio in Glen Haven, not far from Peggy's Cove.

His rich renderings of field and forest, river and rocks, are more than pretty pictures. The artist uses landscape to speak about history and identity, the scenes coloured with what he calls "the pigment of the imagination."

He points to *Into the Mirror*, a painting he made of the Canaan River in Jemseg, which won a finalist award in a recent edition of *International Artist* magazine. "When I say 'into the mirror,' there's a direct relationship I feel between myself and my own spirituality and the landscape ...when I looked across the river into this scene, it was just like looking into myself."

What did he see? "In that landscape I saw somebody who is deeply and passionately in love with the land, with the spirituality that it has there for me," he says. "That's how I see the landscape, I see it as part of me. I am part of it."

The vast majority of works in *Autumn Woods*, his solo show on display at Trinity Galleries, in Saint John, until Oct. 3, are of New Brunswick.

Born in Nova Scotia, Gough only lived in New Brunswick for part of his childhood, moving from Bathurst back to Nova Scotia at the age of 12. Still, Gough, 62, considers New Brunswick his motherland, literally the place his mother comes from. Likewise, Nova Scotia, where his father hails from, he calls his fatherland.

They are a continual source of subject and inspiration. "I could live a thousand lifetimes and never see all there is to see in these two provinces." Having roots in both is the best of two worlds, he says. While they are culturally and geographically close, the prevailing elements of their landscapes are quite different: Nova Scotia, practically surrounded by the sea, feels almost like an island to Gough, while, to him, the dominant feature of New Brunswick is its extensive, storied river systems.

He enjoys summer canoeing, and following back roads by car until they become so rough they are impassable. "I love exploring," he says. "I just get in my car and go." One day last fall, he and his wife, Brenda, got up early and started driving around the Miramichi. "I had absolutely no idea where the heck we were," he says. As they came down over a hill, the early sun was just cresting the ridge behind them. "The sunlight on the hill on the other side of the Miramichi just blew me away. As soon as I see something like that, I already know that is a painting, and I already know, almost instinctively, what the name of that painting will be." Edge of Autumn captures the hot colours and cool, hoary frost of that fall morning.

He makes plein air sketches and photographs on site, not painting until he returns to his home studio because most of his canvases are too large to bring into the bush. "Most of the places that I end up, if it's not on a river, it's literally trekking through the woods." He says the photographs he takes on site are a kind of visual notebook. "They bring back memories of how cold it was, the feeling of the kind of moisture, how wet it was, whether it was raining, and also for some of the details, like the texture of bark on a particular tree, stuff like that."

It was about 30 years ago that he moved to rural Nova Scotia, where he lives with his wife, after having lived "here and there," including Ottawa, Toronto and Fort Lauderdale, following studies in the late '60s at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and, later, Andrews University in Michigan.

While he is no stranger to city living, "I'm just a country boy," he says of his chosen lifestyle. "I wouldn't trade the serenity of what we have here for anything." He can count on one hand the number of times he goes into Halifax, less than half an hour's drive away, in a year.

A couple of years ago when one of his two sons, a creative director at Cond Nast in New York City, was visiting, he commented on the hush, which he found unsettling. "He said, 'Oh my God, Dad, it's so quiet here, I can hear my heartbeat, and it's really scary.' "I'm going, 'That's why we love it here.'" Gough, meanwhile, can't stand to spend more than a few days in the city (although he does relish a good steak when he travels to the opening of one of his exhibitions).

From his studio on the bottom floor of his coastal home, he works eight hours a day. "If I'm not in a canoe or in the woods, I'm painting," he says. Even in his backyard, which he has looked at "a thousand times," there's always new subject matter. "A lot of people look at things, but they don't really see anything. Artists that have trained themselves over the years really don't look, they see."

With no shortage of scenes he wants to paint, Gough's biggest frustration is getting one series done so he can start on the next. "I always know what my next body of work will be," he says. "Right now, the next four years, I know exactly what I want to do."

He is represented by galleries in Calgary, Toronto and Invermere, B.C., and his works are part of dozens of corporate and public collections, including those of Prince Philip, the Bank of Montreal and the City of Aberdeen, Scotland.

Upcoming projects include a series of seascapes for a gallery in Toronto, and another of seasonal works in tribute to the late American artist Andrew Wyeth, who was known for his moody winter scenes. "That's when you really feel the actual character of the landscape itself, when there's no leaves on the trees," Gough says. "(Wyeth) said that nature in the summertime and the fall seems very friendly. But in the wintertime, you realize how cruel nature can be. So I'm interested in doing a lot of painting this winter." He'll shift from his usual acrylic on canvas to work in the more traditional medium of oil on mahogany panels. "It's just more of a heritage kind of thing, like painting on birch panels like the Group of Seven used to do."

He cites A.Y. Jackson and especially Tom Thomson, as inspirations. "He was a woodsman, a fisherman, and a hunter. He loved the outdoors, and he painted what he loved." Gough is taking a creative cue from the Group

of Seven, moving from highly detailed paintings to a looser style. "I'm starting to find the right marriage between Impressionism and the supposed realism that I do," he says.

He is growing comfortable with inviting the viewer to participate more in a work, he says, to see the landscape he conveys in simple, suggestive brushwork. "I've always believed that you don't need to see everything, every single leaf and every little blade of grass, to get the story."

As he matures into this new Impressionist style, he is shifting his focus for his next New Brunswick series, too, moving from the woods to main street. "I don't mean painting Saint John or painting Moncton, I'm talking about the little communities in New Brunswick," Gough says, such as Doaktown or McAdam and other tiny towns on the fringe of small centres. They would be in the style of *Passing Through*, which he made six to eight years ago. The painting depicts a logging truck on a rural New Brunswick route on a winter morning, a simple white house on either side of the road. From one house, a figure walks from the back door toward a woodpile.

"To me it represented - both of those houses and the fact that this guy was up at 7 o'clock in the morning, going to get some wood to put in the kitchen woodstove and put the coffee on - those two houses represented for me the kind of community that exists in New Brunswick," Gough says. "You'll be driving through the woods, there will be nothing for miles, and all of a sudden you'll come to like 10 or 15 homes in the middle of nowhere and it's just like, 'Wow, this feels like home,' and it's just a community of maybe 20, 30 people."

When he depicts people in his work, they are distant or nondescript, and the man-made features he includes - barns, boathouses, wharves - could be from another time. "I like to see the landscape where you know people have been there, but I don't want to single out any individual," he says. "It's much more important to me to have the universal person there, where you can actually put yourself in that situation. Where you can imagine being the person who lives across the road from the woodpile. Or you could be the person going to the woodpile."

As a rural way of life cedes to a more urban existence, even in rustic New Brunswick, there is an urgent documentary impulse in Gough's work. "I want to capture that kind of stuff before (it) all disappears and changes. "

He doesn't consider himself an activist through his work, although he does support certain environmental groups, including the Atlantic Salmon Federation. His support is in kind. Over the past couple of years, he donated 2,000 posters to Ducks Unlimited for a fundraiser for wetlands programs. "There's an education process through the work that I create. I try to inspire people to see the beauty of the landscape, and how much it needs to be protected and preserved," he says.

"I'm not interested in painting the gore or being sensational. I'm trying to show people how beautiful this place is and we need to be taking as best care of it as possible."

Next summer, Gough plans to return to New Brunswick, to paddle the Nepisiguit, a river of his childhood. "I'm interested in it because that leads all the way to Bathurst, which is where my mother is from, and it has a lot of memories for me," he says, including salmon fishing with his father, an avid outdoorsman.

"A lot of these works are basically a map of my life," he says. "I'm going back into my past, because of the familiarity I have with all these places in New Brunswick, and every time I paint a piece like this, it's like going home."

Kate Wallace covers the arts for the *Telegraph-Journal* and is a frequent contributor to *Salon*.