

in the galleries



Wind Blowing through Trees, Lower Jemseg.



Cosmos and Fir Trees.



Sunflowers in the Mist.

A luminous legacy

Gallery 78, in Fredericton, marks the passing of Dawn McCracken with the retrospective *Celebrating a Life*.

Story by Mike Landry

By the time I became aware of Dawn McCracken's work, it was too late. The Grand Lake painter had leukemia and died two weeks later, on Jan. 4, 2013.

She was in the midst of preparing for a new show, scheduled for October at Gallery 78, the commercial gallery that had represented her since the mid-1980s. She had already completed two new works, and had three unfinished canvases in her studio at the time of her death.

I had looked up her work as part of my research into coming exhibitions for 2013. I was immediately struck by the light in her landscapes, the ethereal acutance of her colour and oil.

As I am not one to usually be moved by landscapes, my reaction was significant, and I made note to contact her in the fall.

I won't be able to talk with McCracken about her work, but I can commune with her work – Gallery 78 has put together *Celebrating a Life*, an exhibition of McCracken's work on display until Feb. 3.

"We are just so devastated, really sad," Gallery 78 co-founder Inge Pataki says. "I

really lost a good friend."

McCracken was born in Fredericton in 1935. She was educated at University of New Brunswick and studied fine art at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and at Queen's University. She spent much of her career in New York City, working as production manager of publications for the American Kennel Club, before returning to New Brunswick in the '80s.

Along with Gallery 78, McCracken's work was shown in solo and group exhibitions in Montreal, including at Galerie West End Gallery, the Walter Klinkhoff Gallery and the Montreal Museum spring exhibitions.

Pataki says she first became aware of McCracken's work after an exhibition at the UNB Art Centre. One work – a graphite drawing of Grand Lake – remained in Pataki's memory strongly for years, so she eventually began representing her.

"She was an incredible draftsman," Pataki says. "The atmospheric influence in the part of the world where she lived was amazing. You could look at one of her paintings and you could almost feel the

summer breeze. It was not just painting – there was some tension behind or beyond it."

A reclusive, private artist, McCracken had a deep love for the landscape in which she grew up. She was meticulous, devoting much time to each canvas. More than an eye for nature, her paintings rendered her unique perspective on place.

"I was in awe of her intellect," Pataki says. "She was very inquisitive, very curious about specific fields – the German philosopher, Schopenhauer, was one of her guidelines. She was an incredible person to be exposed to her conversations. I learned a great deal from her."

Beyond her painting, to which she devoted time each day, she also was especially fond of her cats, as well as the country strays she would often take to be spayed.

"She was a fabulous gardener, people always commented on her flower gardens," Pataki says. "They were sort of wild, but she had such extraordinary varieties of poppies and wildflowers. She was just full of love and devotion to the place where she lived."



One of Dawn McCracken's last paintings, Field with Apple Trees, 12 noon.

McCracken had an obsessive drive to "get it right," as she saw the world. In a 2010 artist statement, titled "It's Pay-back Time," she considered why this was.

"(H)ow did I end up doing this? Why has every leaf, every blade of grass, every pebble, every drifting cloud become so important ... Memory brought the answer. When I was a child growing up here I enjoyed nature in an unquestioning manner, being in it and part of it. Every day brought new images and impressions that could be recalled years later.

"I came to realize that this was a great gift generously given, and, after a lifetime, I at last began to feel I must say 'Thank you' to whatever it is that the word 'nature' encompasses. Painting these trees



Cat on bench with stone and tiger lilies.

and bushes with care and respect is my attempt to pay the debt, and also to say good-bye." ☞

Mike Landry is the *Telegraph-Journal's* arts and culture editor: landry.michael@telegraphjournal.com.