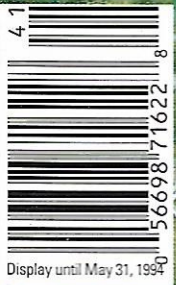


art

impressions

a realistic approach to art in canada



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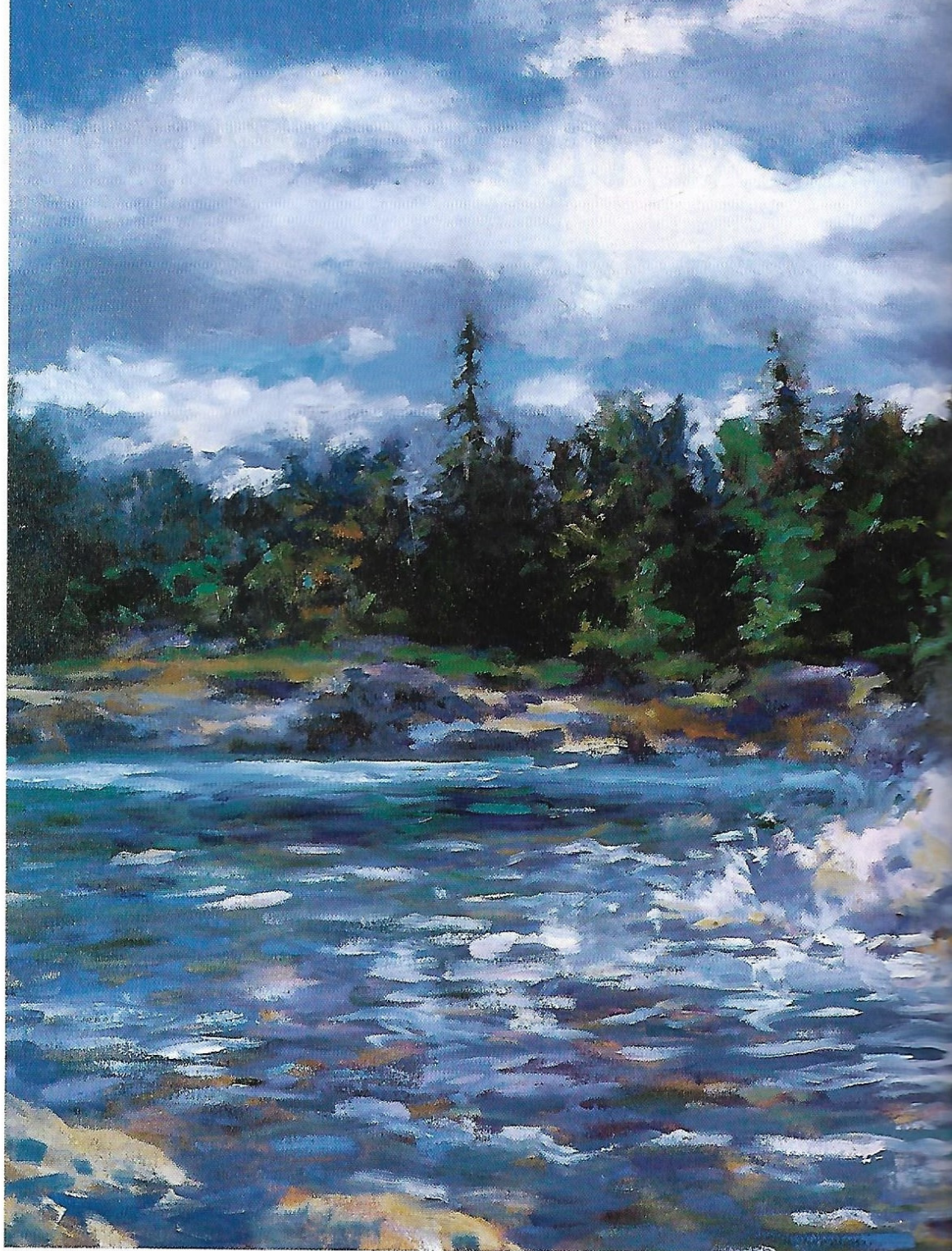
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It is impossible to confine creative personality in a definition, but often an elemental theme emerges over time that becomes one of the benchmarks by which a painter is known. For Doug Edwards, the fundamental fascination seems to be the play of light on colour. More specifically, he appears to be fascinated by the mood light conveys on the landscape surrounding his country place in the Creemore district, located about an hour's drive north of his home and studio in Toronto.

Born in Toronto in 1954, Edwards became acquainted with Creemore's rural vistas as a teenager, when his parents bought a farm there. In tune with the big sky and rolling hills of the area from the outset, he would later return to it as a painter, making the Creemore landscape his principal artistic subject. But Edwards first had some rivers to cross.

As is so often the case with artists, the trip "home" to Creemore could not be completed until Edwards had paid some dues along the way — the most important one amounting to a personal war with his own self-doubt as a painter.

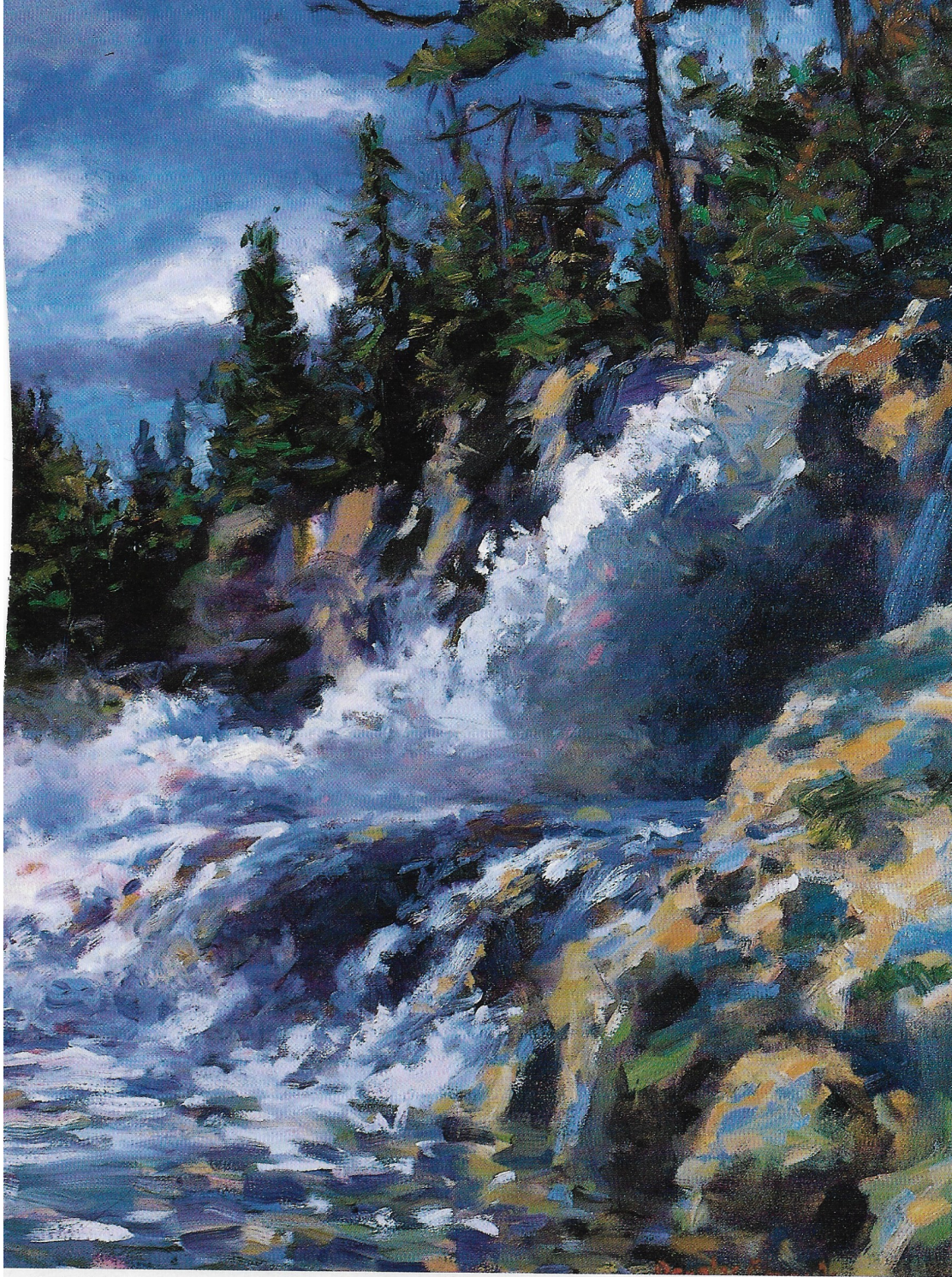
After three years of classical training in figure portraiture at the Ontario College of Art, Edwards spent his fourth and final year of study in Florence, Italy, where he fell in with an entourage of about 25 Canadian art students who saw themselves as expatriates. Many of them also saw themselves as landscape artists. That worked fine for a year until the reality of their situation came home. Emotional bonds were broken, the little band of painters scattered all over Europe and North America, and Edwards found himself back home in Toronto, alone with all his misgivings. It was 1980 and the fantasy had ended.



Cascade Falls (oil on canvas, 24 by 36 inches, 1993). "I've painted quite a bit in Algonquin Park, Georgian Bay and Muskoka," Edwards says. "The wildness of the

Douglas Edwards is carrying on
Like those much-heralded icons, his art
of the Canadian landscape. He reminds us that

Splendid



rocks, the pine and birch trees, and the waters of the Canadian shield give endless compositions and inspiration."

the tradition of the Group of Seven.
is firmly founded in the beauty and power
we, too, have seen...

days *by Gordon Bagley*

Art Impressions Spring 1994

"It's one thing to think of yourself as an artist when you're a student," says Edwards, "quite another to be out of training and facing the prospects of making your living as one."

For a year, Edwards could not bring himself to pick up a brush. "When I came back from Florence, I truly didn't know if I would or could paint," he recalls. "I had to decide if I even was a painter to begin with. I spent a year pumping gasoline, stacking boxes in liquor stores and working at assorted odd jobs to keep myself in pocket money."

But then, gradually, he began to surface. "By 1981, I'd had enough of all that," he says, "so I hired on as a 'walk-by' portrait artist at Canada's Wonderland and then Ontario Place. Pastel stuff." It was a long way from the heady days of Florence, but it was at least a start. Edwards soon found himself painting again in oils — commissioned family portraits and a few homes, including some quirky assignments; like the time he painted cloudscapes all over a client's bathroom walls.

Interestingly, it was in Florence that Edwards had embarked on landscape painting, seeing it as liberating exploration that took him beyond the confines of figure drawing. The first three years of classical training had taught him the essence of art and now he no longer viewed the universe as embodied completely in the human form.

In Florence, he had painted his first sky. It was a revelation of sorts, for he could deal specifically with the pure aspects of light without form except for the shapes of cloud formations. Like his memories of Creemore, he would carry what he saw forward through time with him until now, back in Canada, and beginning to get

some creative air under his wings, he returned to it with a purpose. Unlikely, but completely logical, he made a connection with his art:

"It just seemed natural," says Edwards, "to go back to Creemore to expand the work I had begun on skyscapes in Florence."

What followed has become Edwards' career. In 1981, he began to paint the skies of Creemore in the morning, in the evening, in full day; sky in all weather and in all seasons of the year. Gradually, he began to include light's impact on land in his painting — one water, which is only thick air, Edwards would mirror the clouds he created in the sky. Then came water and land together and finally, fully realised, sky, water and land working in unison under the influence of light, sometimes with the shadows of clouds drifting over the land, until it all came together, like three great themes of some epic novel.

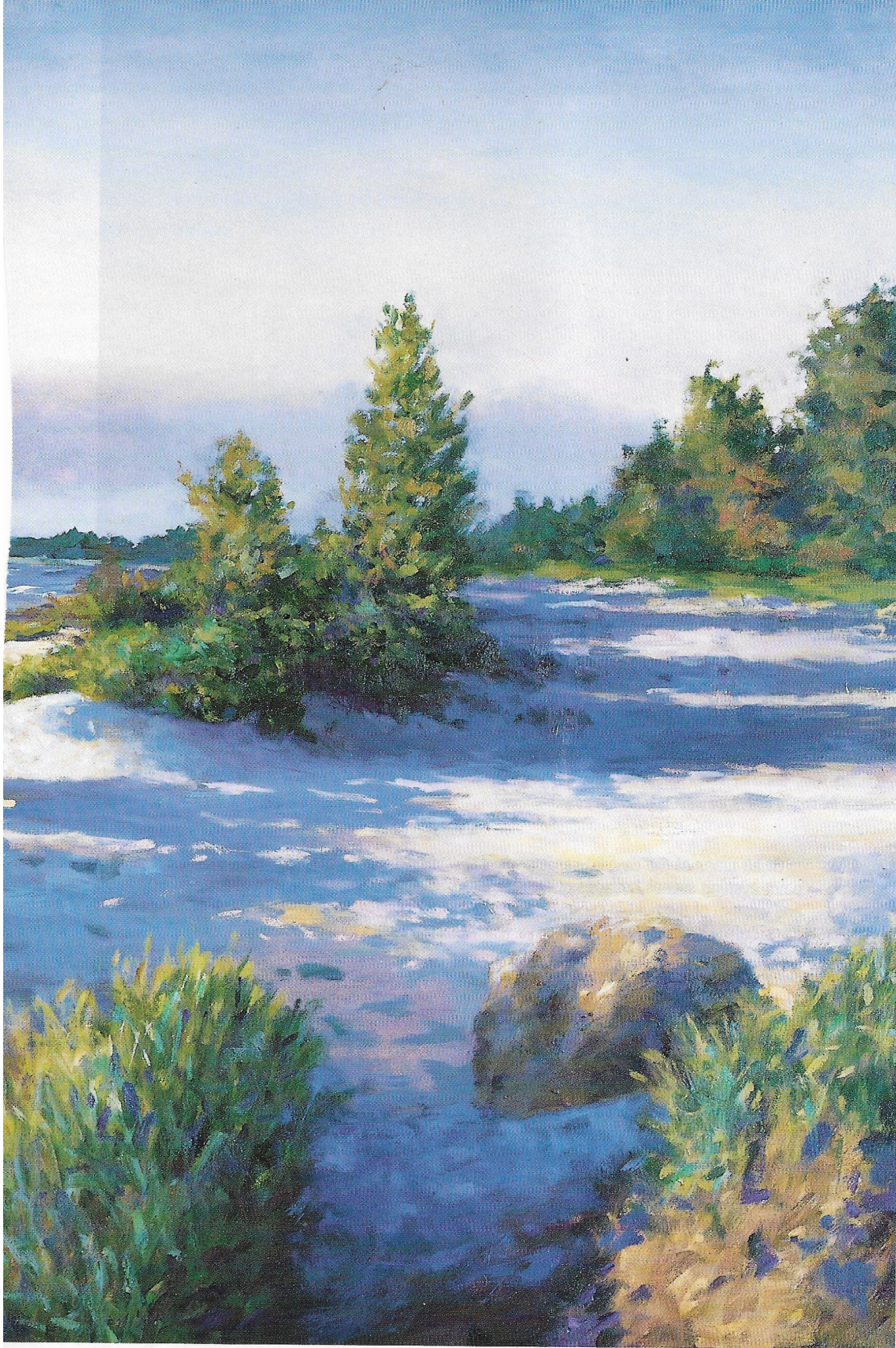
"At first," says Edwards, "I was after the traditional aspects of sky — the realistic sky that the masters used to paint in the light of southern France. They gave it a kind of monumental feeling. I must have had some success doing that, because one of these early paintings now hangs in a Mormon church in Brampton north of Toronto — the buyers said that they saw a religious quality in it."

Within a year of returning to his roots, Edwards held his first solo show — where else, but in Creemore — followed by two more exhibitions in 1983 and 1984. Edwards' gallery was called "The Mad and Noisy Valley Gallery", so named because the building was located where Mad and the Noisy rivers converge. No longer a studio, the building



Southampton Beach, Lake Huron (oil on canvas, 36 by 48 inches, 1993). "Evening light is often the most interesting and dramatic time of day to paint," Edwards op

... "it's what you don't say, rather suggest by the unfinished edges. You have



I tried to contrast the warm light on the sand and brush to the cool bluish elongated shadows."

than what you do say — what you
to leave something to the imagination”...

now houses the Creemore Brewing Company, which produces a variety of “alternative” beers.

These days, after winning first prize in the 1992 Toronto Harbour In Art Show, he teaches two courses on art at a community college, rents out part of his Toronto house and makes his living painting. In short, Edwards is in full stride as an artist and his work is more than in demand — he hasn’t even had time to catalogue photographic records of his work.

Showing principally out of the Gallerie Rochon in Toronto, Edwards counts among his many corporate clients and private collectors the likes of American Airlines, Canadian Airlines, Bell Canada, Dun & Bradstreet, Lawrence Coward of William M. Mercer Ltd., Toronto, Jack Irving of Irving Oil, New Brunswick and C.H. Steinbach, president of Molcan Ltd., Toronto. Royal Trust will feature his work on its calendars this year.

Still mounting one show a year, Edwards’ next exhibition is scheduled for March or April this year.

In his general approach to painting, Edwards usually begins with location sketches, which give him the colour values and composition studies he needs for the big canvasses he prefers — typical sizes for him being three by four feet; four by five feet; four by six feet and four by seven feet.

Stylistically, he has evolved from the more conservative and realistic value studies of his earlier works to a present day pre-occupation with the more suggestive compositional form and colour palette of the Impressionist school, particularly in his use of complimentary colours and colour opposites.

“I don’t want to get too finished in my detail,” he adds,



Apple Blossoms, Edge of Pond (oil on canvas, 30 by 40 inches, 1993). "One of my favorite times of the year is late spring," says Edwards. "The colours of the greens and sky and water are clear and soft. Here I echoes the whites and violets of the blossoms in the sky and again in the water, in contrast to the greens."

"not only because oil doesn't lend itself well to detail, but because I believe all painting looks better under-finished. In a sense, it's what you don't say, rather than what you do say — what you suggest by the unfinished edges. You have to leave something to the imagination."

Not averse to taking a reference photograph to preserve the light quality and composition he is after in a given piece, Edwards nonetheless prefers to sketch quickly on location and bring that home to the studio. "When you paint on location you have to work quickly," he explains, "and there comes a time when you have to stop — light changes colour fast at sunset and sunrise. You can keep looking forever but eventually you have to pick a spot and say 'that's it.' Even during the day, colour values will change with the action of the sun and clouds — so you end up having to remember what it was that originally captured your imagination."

For the same reason, Edwards paints under a skylight he installed in the ceiling above the north wall of his studio — the converted garage of his Toronto home. "North light is best," he says, "because it is constant — you don't want the light changing on the canvas when you are trying to present a certain time of day."

Of all times of the day, Edwards prefers to paint evening scenes because of the richness and warmth of the light in contrast to the cool dark colours of the land. He says it's in keeping with the Impressionist palette he is currently experimenting with: "It's the quality of light and the exaggeration of depth — it lets me play with the colours more. It's a challenge, too. Perhaps the hardest thing is painting while you are looking into the light."

Be that as it may, Edwards is not blinded by it. His major landscapes, generous in size and scope, elevates that glance Everyman makes through the car window on a Sunday drive in the country. In Edwards' landscapes, there is that shock of realizing you too have seen splendid days. Lest we forget.

Working strictly in oils, he prefers the "wet-into-wet" technique that is anathema to acrylics, which dry and flatten too quickly for his taste. To Edwards, using acrylic is a bit like painting with cement. Oils also permit revisions and are less difficult to use when blending edges, he says. Beyond all that, acrylics are not part of the classic tradition he associates himself with.

Edwards prepares his canvases with a neutral gesso — brown or grey — and then shellacks that to avoid a chalky texture. It also helps the paint "slide." Using a traditional approach to the layering of paint, Edwards

first blocks in major areas of colour — one colour for the sky and the land, and then works forward to the final detail, saving highlights for the last.

Although canvas is his primary medium, he has also borrowed from the Group of Seven, who used wallboard glued to canvas, panels of shellacked birch wood and masonite.

In sum, Edwards' work rests somewhere between a wake up call and a revelation. His work reminds us to seize the beauty of the day before we lose it. In concentrating on the rolling hill country of Creemore, he is attempting to keep the mythos of his part of Canada alive. His work projects an unfettered and uncomplicated love of the land. Other than the moody dialogue of Wyeth or the mystic air suffused into Coleville's painting, Edwards still reminds us that one's soul extends well beyond our fingertips, deep into the heart of the land we are standing on. The great Group of Seven, whose art was also defined by the country they explored, would surely applaud. *MB*

Gordon Bagley is a Toronto-based freelance writer and editor who frequently contributes to Art Impressions. Douglas Edwards is published in the limited edition market by Minotaur of Toronto.