

of lines and shapes and colours

by josephine matyas

From the studio in the third storey of her home, Wolfe Island artist Debra Krakow has a bird's-eye view of fields and farms, boats and channels. But the voyage that saw Krakow settle in the Kingston area was not always graced with such a long-range vision.

Just over a decade ago, Krakow and her husband Rob decided to leave the urban lifestyle behind, trade in their Montreal subway passes for a car and head west to Ontario. "We both had our licences, but neither of us had really spent much time behind the wheel," says Krakow, laughing as she recalls how they started in Ottawa and began to drive, searching for a new home one rural community at a time.

"We liked the idea of building our own house, and we liked the country. We had this notion that we needed 20 acres, so we just hopped in the car and took a vacation and started driving and looking."

When they got to Wolfe Island, the land was affordable and the community was within commuting distance of a large centre, an important factor when their dream house was built and the search for employment began.

Building her own home was a natural fit for Krakow, an architect trained at McGill University in Montreal. These days she works as an architect part-time at Hotel Dieu Hospital, an arrangement that leaves her the flexibility to pursue her other passion as an artist.



She credits some of her instructors for teaching her how to understand colour and to pay attention to the mixture of exact shades and hues.

Krakow grew up in a household full of art and design. Her father was an architect in Montreal, and it was through seeing his work and portfolio that she realized architecture would be an opportunity to have a career and learn art skills at the same time.

“At McGill, we would have classes in drawing and watercolour that were a mandatory part of the architecture program. That really got me going — it really taught me how to draw. And once I graduated, I started doing a lot more painting on my own, mainly watercolours. After university, I took courses that covered the whole gamut in every medium from sculpture, drawing and painting to silkscreening and printmaking.”

But it's the medium of watercolour that has largely captured Krakow's brush strokes. She credits some of her instructors for teaching her how to understand colour and to pay attention to the mixture of exact shades and hues. From that solid grounding in the theory of colour mixing, she intuitively learned to shape her own sense of palette.

“Now, more and more, I come back to watercolour as my main medium,” she explains. “I like to capture the quality of light — and that's watercolour.”

There was a time early in her artistic career when Krakow painted mainly street scenes, some of which she sold from a

booth at the market. But along with the move to Wolfe Island came a “real infatuation” with farm scenes and animals. So rural settings — sheep, cows, chickens and turkeys — are recurrent themes on Krakow's easel. You're just as likely to find the artist sitting in a field surrounded by a herd of cattle, patiently making sketches and taking note of the faces of the creatures, as you are to find her hopping out of her car, camera in hand, to capture a moment that will be destined for her canvas.

Forest settings, lakes, leaves, rocks and sky are other favourite Krakow scenes. When the family goes camping, Krakow always takes her camera along. “I take tons of pictures,” she says. “I find it more challenging to paint nature, since there are so many details, and I need to think about a piece and decide what stays in and what gets left out. There is so much material in nature, and it is impossible to paint every leaf in a scene.”

Evening scenes are another setting that Krakow is beginning to explore — a formidable subject, since darkness is especially difficult to achieve in watercolour.

Krakow explains, “It's always about the quality of the light, and the light at nighttime is always challenging.” She has completed a series of highway scenes in pitchy darkness and is moving her sights to capturing evenings on Princess Street in downtown Kingston.

That gamble to settle on Wolfe Island has paid off well for Debra Krakow. She has a lifestyle that is the envy of many — the stability of a professional career and the ability and freedom to follow her passion for art. And there's also that great bird's-eye view that keeps her ahead of what's around the next bend.

Debra Krakow's paintings will be on exhibit at Gallery Raymond, 334 Princess Street, and in the Summer Dock Studio on Wolfe Island (adjacent to the ferry docks) in June. ■