



Waiting, oil on Russian birch panel

## The Simplest Act

written by Michael Dumas

Long before I painted, I drew. Without knowing it, I had chosen a foundation for my art that continues to this very day. But back then I was aware only of an innate desire, something not to be questioned, simply acted upon.

that I felt I had to keep a wary eye on. Afterwards, I would often show these efforts to my aunt who invariably praised them. But even at this very young age, I was already demonstrating an intensity to know things in a deeper sense through drawing, and that the drawings were somehow the measure of how well I understood the world around me. So, I would reply that they were not as good as they ought to be and add that I would come back tomorrow and try again ... which I did; a habit that



Mill Cloth - House Sparrows, oil on Russian birch panel

An early memory from when I was about four or five years old is still extremely vivid to me. My aunt and uncle, who lived next door, kept chickens and for weeks on end I would cross the field between our houses to sketch them. Letting myself into the coop or pen, I would fill page after page with pencil renditions of the hens, and a bold rooster

also taxed my mother's resources in keeping me supplied with paper. It was usually a letter writing pad, but some of those early works were done on less conventional materials, such as the clean inside panels cut from cereal boxes, pieces of corrugated cardboard and, in at least a couple instances, small scraps of wood from my grandfather's workshop.



Le Voyageur, oil on Russian birch panel



Gypsy, oil on Russian birch panel







The Yearling - Young Moose, oil on Russian birch panel

I draw to record, to make notes both brief and extensive, to explore variations that are possible from a single source and to discover just what attracted me to a particular thing in the first place. Drawing has an immediacy and directness to it. Move quickly in with the pencil, precisely to the spot and then move on; thrust and parry. It must be done rightly and the first time. In spite of this, it can be a wonderfully relaxing activity and the joy and purpose I first found in drawing has never diminished. Even so, I also find myself wanting to

say more about the experience than what I have made of it in my sketchbook, or at least, to say it in a somewhat different way. Sometimes this leads to a very finished drawing, but most often the urge is to say it in paint.

Over the years I have worked in many paint mediums, including watercolour, gouache, and egg tempera. A brief dismal period working with acrylic resulted in a single completed painting and one other effort discarded shortly after starting. My preferred medium is oil, something



Trust - Draft Horse and House Sparrows, oil on Russian birch panel





Hunt and Peck - Rooster, oil on Russian birch panel

I used extensively in my youth, and to which I returned about fifteen years or so ago. It has always seemed to me that in the changeover from drawing to painting, something is gained and something is lost on either side. Because of this, I place equal value on the drawings and the paintings alike. The drawings can never be fulfilled completely without the paintings, and the paintings cannot be born without the drawings. It is a very symbiotic relationship.

Every drawing or painting inevitably has something to do with the individual; it's not simply about what is being depicted in and of itself. There are innumerable things one can choose to paint, that is, the objects themselves; but the underlying purpose of creating has to do with conveying something about why those objects inspire attention in the first place. The greater the connection, the more insightful the work will be, the more truth it will reveal, and not just about the thing painted but about the artist as well. There is a dilemma for the artist in all this, and it has very much to do with conveying to the viewer that the experience is real, both in its physicality and emotional content.

Our visual experience is a combination of perceiving through both the eyes and the mind. We are creatures given to certain preferences



Kinship - Burrowing Owl, Pearl-spotted Owl, Tawny Owl, oil on Russian birch panel



First Born - Mourning Doves, oil on canvas



Genetic Drift - Serval, Lynx, Margay, oil on Russian birch panel

over others. We pay attention and remember things that specifically interest us, and without conscious thought we edit out those things for which we care little. We are easily prone to exaggeration, to emphasizing things that we feel are important, while at the same time, blithely dismissing other things that are every bit as real, as being of little importance. So, to create an extremely convincing painting requires of the artist a host of illusions, a deceit with the best of intentions. Furthermore, if this endeavour meets with success, the viewer will not see the means by which they have been deceived, unless of course they have been schooled to detect such things. Fortunately, this does nothing to reduce the visual effect and in many ways can even add to the appreciation of both the painting and the person who created it. It's a wishful desire on the part of the painter that the latter should always be the case, but in the general course of things it must remain sufficient that the viewer simply believes what you are saying.

And just what would I have you believe? I am very much attracted to things that express the simple harmony of the everyday. In a shed behind Bellamy's mill, two common house sparrows perch on a pile of discarded flour sacks. Some areas of the cloth are ablaze in full sunlight, while others are only softly





Silence in the Shadows - Maiden Sculpture and European Robin, oil on Russian birch panel

illuminated; the rest drop back into deep darkness. Oh, beautiful! There are many people who pass by, but no one seems to notice. In the city of Arles, a gypsy man removes himself from the hustle and bustle of the city square and seeks a quiet spot. He trusts his little white dog to warn of intruders, and the dog watches me. I find myself in a quiet green garden located in a small rural French village, under the silent gaze of a marble maiden. She seems to be keeping a secret. A small bird forages nearby, unconcerned with my presence.

At home in my own garden, a young dove keeps close to his mother for security, but looks out with interest upon the wider world still so new to him. I know what that feels like. Today it rained and I've gathered some branches from the red currant bush that grows there, in order to place them into the painting with the two birds. I keep them wet, in response to the day outside my studio window. Some soil has been gathered too, and likewise kept damp, and I am reminded of my companion of many years, a wire-haired dachshund named Sassafras, who lies buried in this same garden. I experience a flow of emotion rise and fall as I paint, and find myself trusting that it will inevitably seep its way into my work. There is something precious and ultimately profound in the simplest act of being.

Michael Dumas was born and raised in the small town of Whitney, Ontario, located at the eastern entrance to Algonquin Park. Exposure and familiarity with the wilderness and its creatures are reflected in his art, from childhood to present day. He worked for a time as a ranger in Algonquin and continues his connection to the Park by joining the winter bear den research team and having his work on display each year at the Algonquin Art Centre. Michael's subject matter also includes rural themes and people; the common denominator within all of his art being an intimate connection based on direct experience.

His work has been presented in many prestigious galleries and museums in North America, Europe, Japan and around the world. He is listed in many references, including Who's Who in Canada, Who's Who in the World and the International Register of Profiles. He has designed postage stamps for Canada Post, commemorative coins for the Royal Canadian Mint, and is a published writer of both poetry and articles on art, nature and conservation. To see more of Michael's art, news and events, visit his website at [www.natureartists.com/dumasm.htm](http://www.natureartists.com/dumasm.htm) and [www.buckinghamfineart.com](http://www.buckinghamfineart.com). You can reach Michael by e-mail at [natures.studio.inc@sympatico.ca](mailto:natures.studio.inc@sympatico.ca)



Daydream, oil on Russian birch panel