

Paintings capture ephemeral essence of place in time

By Carol Picard - Rocky Mountain Outlook - May 22, 2008

Some people paint the mountain landscapes and strive to freeze a moment in time exactly as it appears - the way the sun strikes a slope, the way a cloud obscures its peak, the exact dusty green of its lower slopes.

When Debra Van Tuinen paints a mountain, she strives to capture exactly how that mountain feels - the emotions it evoked, the way she felt with it in her gaze, the thoughts it invoked.

The mountain exists only in her mind, along with those other thoughts and feelings, as she works. No photograph is propped nearby, no sketch is at hand to remind her.

For Van Tuinen, the goal is not to capture the mountain, but rather, the essence of the moment.

The Olympia, Washington artist has been in Banff since early April on a six-week residency with the Summit Gallery of Fine Art, where her solo exhibition opens this Saturday (May 24). She's been free to roam and explore and sit and think, coming and going from the Summit's small studio space when the muse moves her.

In that time, she's created 19 new works for the show, entitled Transcendent Spirit.

In perfect keeping with her vision, the studio has no windows from which to see.

"It's perfect. At home I've got a studio with lots of windows, and sometimes I have to paper them over because it's too distracting," she says.

After a day of hiking or strolling, or even just sitting and gazing out a window of a hotel, she takes that energy back into the tiny studio and applies it to art board.

"I'm not looking for certain mountains or landscapes, it's more the energy and the spirit of the place I want to capture."

Van Tuinen is an encaustic painter, working with layers of beeswax, tree resin and pigment, embedded with metallic leaf

of copper, silver and bronze, or pearlescent mica chips. The wax and resin is combined with pigment and gently melted in a cake pan on a hot plate before she paints it onto the board. Each painting can contain 50 or more layers, each finished with a hot iron so it bonds to the one below.

Each layer brings its own transcendent light to the work, and each microscopic metallic flake lends a sheen that causes the painting to change with the actual light of day.

"The colour changes as you walk around the piece, and the pieces change colour in the morning light, in the evening light," she said.

The encaustic method, probably one of the oldest art forms in civilization, is extremely time and labour intensive, "but I love it, I just love it."

It wasn't always so, however. In her earliest years as a painter she did very representational work, in oils or black and white etchings. Once she graduated from the University of Washington with a Masters degree in Fine Arts, she started to embrace colour and abstract.

Always blessed with wanderlust and an adventurous spirit - she took her final year of college at an art school in England - she headed off to Japan, where she taught in Niigata and Tokyo and studied woodblocks herself.

In her 30 years as a professional artist ("And a lot of waitressing in the early years!"), Van Tuinen has exhibited in hundreds of public and private galleries around the U.S. and Canada. In 2005 she was invited to the Florence Biennale in Italy, an exposure that has brought her to the attention of the world.

Transcendent Spirit - Debra Van Tuinen runs from May 24 to June 21 at the Summit Gallery of Fine Arts in Banff. The opening reception is Saturday (May 24) from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.