

Artist to Collect

Dave Rheäume





previous page, An Evening on Portage Avenue, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"
 above, The Kingpin, oil on canvas, 36" x 24"
 right, Love on the Gapstow, oil on canvas, 40" x 30"

Freeze Frame

written by Lorie Lee Steiner

The cold, the dark, the snow... Reflections gleaned from childhood memories of growing up in Ottawa haunt the atmospheric paintings Dave Rheume creates today. Art Noir meets Alex Colville with a distinct cinematic edge; each work a single moody frame, seemingly clipped from a filmstrip, hinting at before and after stories that this narrator/artist leaves open for thought.

As far back as he can remember, Dave loved to draw. "When I was only 4 years old I would crawl under my parents' coffee table, lie on my back and draw characters on the underside, like my own

Sistine Chapel ceiling. With 5 older siblings, I was constantly exposed to television shows and comic books with advanced story lines for my age. By the time I was 7 or 8 my brother and I were drawing comics. Not just a page or two, but full-on "issues" with characters of our own creation that came out monthly. Looking back on these comics, I see the rudimentary beginnings of a cinematic style and sense of lighting and narrative."

Lights, Camera, Action

Many a summer day was spent hunched over the desk, diligently inking and colouring panel after panel. In his teens, Dave was pondering a career as a commercial artist, until another passion took hold. Film-making. "At age 13, I started making films with my best friend, using his father's old Super 8 movie camera. We both became hooked. Comic drawing gradually ceded to the movies, although there was much creative cross-pollination as the superheroes of our comics became the stars of our movies. We took ourselves deadly seriously right from the get-go – reading cinema books, studying film history, experimenting with editing and camera techniques. We even showed our films in the high school auditorium for hundreds of people."

Certain he had found his calling, Dave earned a diploma in Radio and Television at Algonquin College and then embarked on a 27 year career in commercials and corporate video in Toronto. As both director and editor, he had the privilege of working with some of the best directors of photography in the country. Through these partnerships, he came to understand the quintessential effects of lighting on objects. "Lighting and composition are the make-or-break factors for any great image," says Dave. "Concepts of back-lighting, rim light, fill, spill, ambient light, colour, temperature... all worked their way into my mental database for future reference."

About 9 years ago, on a whim, Dave picked up a canvas and acrylic paints that his wife had bought for their kids, and painted a small folk-art nighttime hockey scene. One canvas led to another and before long he was producing increasingly more sophisticated paintings. "My brother Ross was already an active and selling artist, so, as the calibre of my paintings improved, we began





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Laura Secord



previous page, Blizzard on Bay, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"
left, The Koepelkerk, oil on canvas, 36" x 24"

above, Home from the Theatre, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"

to exhibit together in private shows. Ross was painting historic archival scenes and, since I am passionate about history myself, I gravitated towards that material as well. Snow, mist, fog, street lamps and the stories of the people depicted, all of these elements dovetailed into what I now consider a typical "Dave Rheaume" painting. I've drawn on my television background extensively to execute these paintings and it's come back full circle – my drawing background fed my filmmaking career that has now morphed back into a painting career."

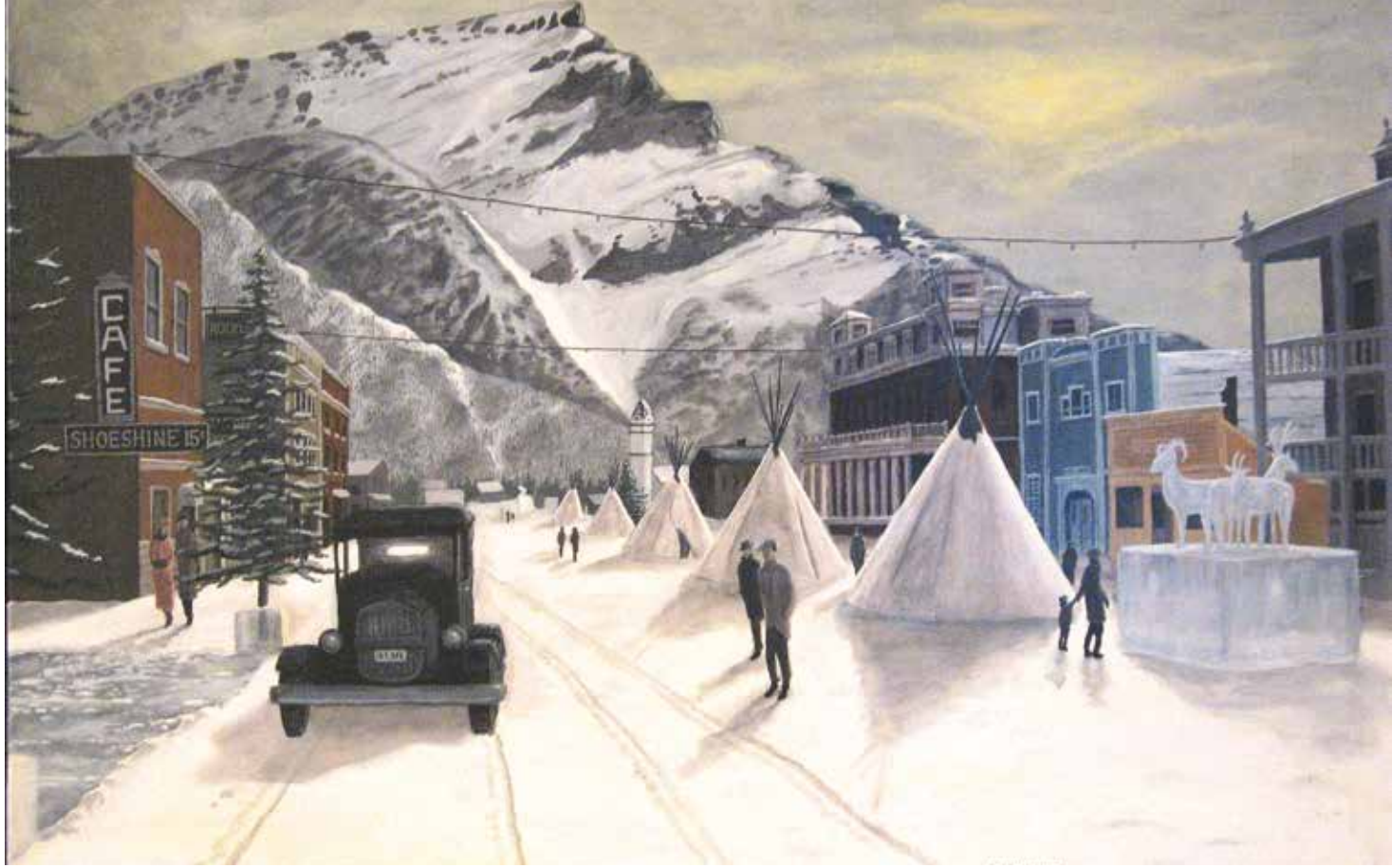
Art & Soul

"I'm a firm believer in living a life with no regrets," says Dave. "I determined that my profession and life would involve the visual arts and storytelling, even if that was to have a detrimental effect on my earnings. Inasmuch as I have a soul, art is where my soul is."

Without the emotional connection between artist and viewer, Dave believes art is just arrogant self-indulgence. Remembrance is also important. Telling the stories of an era that would otherwise be lost to the mysteries of time. He notes, "I've sold a surprisingly high number of paintings to

people in their thirties, who find a certain 'retro' appeal to my work. That gives me a great deal of satisfaction because I feel it's important that history lives on. Art stimulates the imagination to a greater degree than mere photos. But art's role as recorder of history seems to be lost. I'd love to see it come back."

In his youth, Dave spent nights tobogganing at "the pits" – essentially an old sand basin surrounded by woods in the west end of Ottawa. To get there, he and his pals would sneak through a hole in the school fence, over the train tracks and across a vast field of snow under a starlit sky. "On the return trip, exhausted, jacket cuffs frozen with ice, we would sometimes hear the eerie blast of a distant train at the crossing by Bell's Corners. We knew that we'd only have a minute or two to reach the tracks before the train and, for some childish reason, that became an all-important challenge. So, lungs bursting from the cold, straining through shin-deep snow, we'd charge for the crossing. The train would be bearing down on us, like a giant dark metal monster, its bright light turning night to day. If we beat the train we would flop down in the snow on the other side and let the cool snowflakes land on our upturned faces. I probably



above, Banff Winter Carnival, oil on canvas, 24" x 36"

below, Hockey, Christie Pits, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"



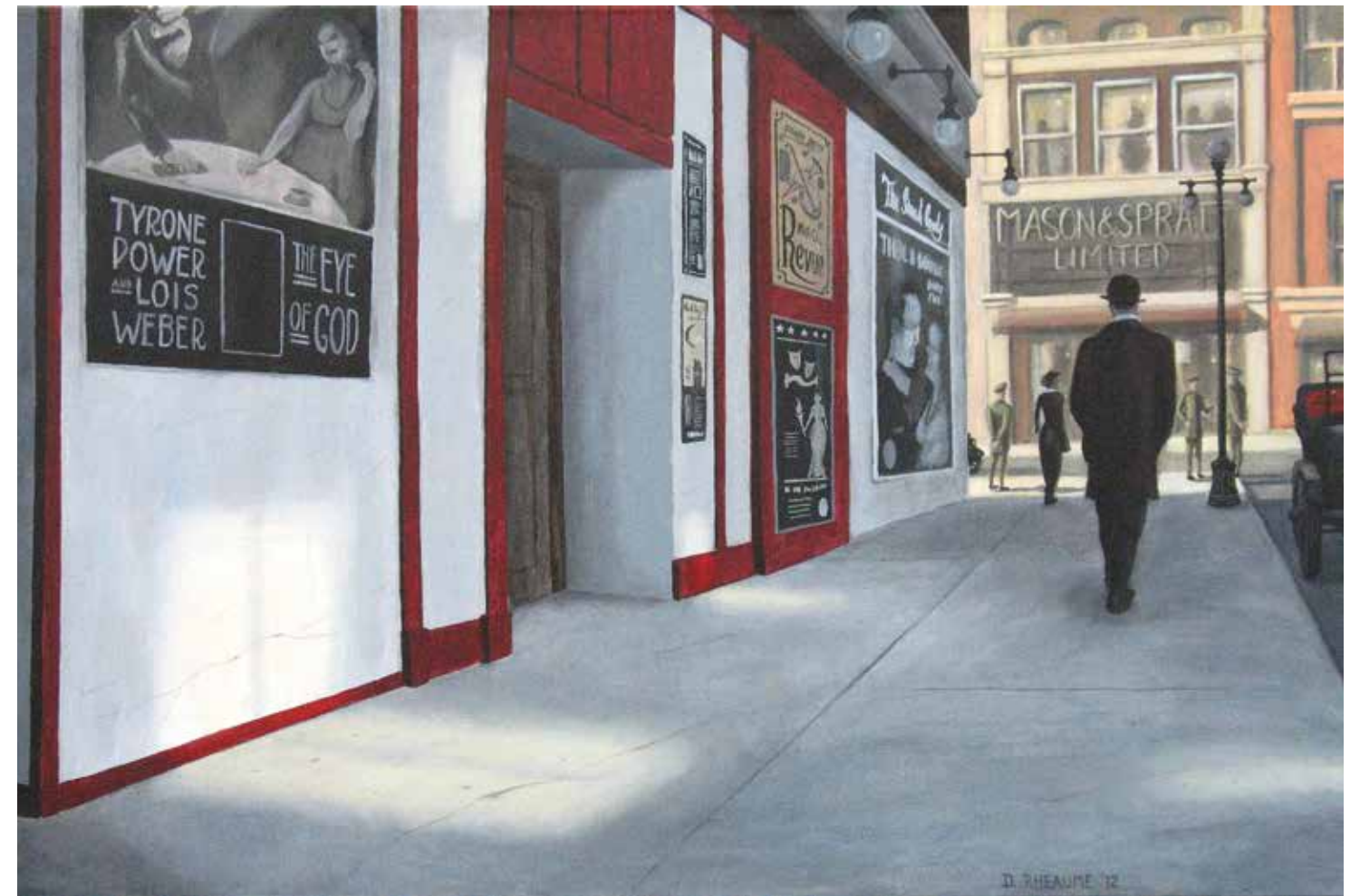
above, Arriving at Union, oil on canvas, 30" x 48"

below, Dome Gas, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"





Boarding on St. Clair, oil on canvas, 24" x 36"



Yonge and Shuter 1916, oil on canvas, 24" x 36"

never felt more alive. So, when I look at my work and see the wintry nights, trains, lights on snow... I think I know what the genesis of all that is."

Archival Impressions

Dave currently lives and works out of a small 2-bedroom pied-a-terre in West Toronto, stripped right down to the basics, enabling him to concentrate full-time on his art. He says his key source of inspiration is a vast visual archive – folders and folders of archival reference pics, sorted by city or era or subject. "I spend a fair amount of time digging up images on the internet, as does my brother Ross, and we often share materials we find. I'm particularly drawn to images that have a 'sequential' feel, in other words, that could represent one 'frame' of a movie film that has frames on either side of it. I like the sense that there's a 'before and after' in the scene. It raises questions: who are these people...where have they come from...where are they going?"

"To me the mark of a truly great artist is one who can convey their subject in a minimum of brushstrokes. If I were to see my art evolving in

any direction, I'd love it to be more impressionist with the same lighting sense. Gustave Caillebotte is a particular favourite. Beyond impressionism, I like Edvard Munch for the sheer creepy darkness of his pieces; Edward Hopper, for the lighting and the figures; Alex Colville, love the compositions and placement of figures in the scene; and Lawren Harris, for the cool smoothness and awe-inspiring way he lights his objects."

Dave's advice to beginners: "Don't be afraid of failure. Experiment. Keep it loose initially. When I look at rookie paintings, even my own earliest efforts, I see a certain 'tightness' in the execution that reflects a lack of confidence. Many times when painting, I'll ask myself "Will anyone like this?" I've been through enough trial-and-error as a self-taught painter that I've learned to relax and run with my initial inspiration for a piece. If I liked the idea, I reason, someone else probably will too. It's impossible to create something that will be universally liked. I just try to keep faith that there's a viewer out there for whom the work will resonate."

Dave's ability to build atmosphere through

strategically placed lighting and 'camera angles' in his compositions creates a nostalgic reality that sets his work apart from that of other artists. The characters in Dave's scenes are distinctive, their poses blending casually into the landscape. He often has the subject with their back to the "camera." For instance, standing to let a train pass as if it's something they've done a hundred times before. The viewer then joins the scene vicariously through the subject who's also travelling into the scene.

One of Dave's goals is to introduce (or re-introduce) viewers to the world their parents grew up in that can never exist again. In that vein, he has found much success. Remarks like, "I remember when ice was delivered by horse." Or, "I remember being out on a winter night exactly like that one" are common from older viewers whose memories are stirred by his creations.

Childish Enthusiasm

New paintings begin with Dave avidly researching archival images. Those that appeal at the time, he sets aside in a "next in line" folder. Images with

a strong story to tell, compositional interest and feature a key person or two in-frame are used as a jumping-off point. Colours, characters, time of day, even seasons are all up for grabs, as are elements either added or removed.

Dave says, "I often concoct historical scenes from my imagination and use historical pics as reference points on details. Whether a piece is based on an actual pic or from my imagination, I produce an 8 x 10 print out over which I draw a grid to translate it to the larger canvas. I sketch out the image in pencil first, using the grid to notice where key points hit but trying as much as possible to let my hand flow free in drawing on the canvas."

Once he's happy with the pencil work, Dave will redo the drawing in a light wash of watery black paint. The completed black line painting he calls his "colouring book" and jokes that the painting is as "good as done at this point." After sorting out the primary and secondary light sources, he does some loose shadow work, again in a watery black paint, to get a sense of the main areas of contrast in the piece. From there work proceeds from





previous page, The Jetty, oil on canvas, 24" x 36"

above, The Shift End, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"

background to foreground, applying the finished paint and overpainting with the closer elements as he works his way towards the foreground.

"In the case of a painting with a great deal of mist or aerial perspective," Dave explains, "I often paint the backgrounds in fairly strong colour and contrast, and slowly dial them back with misty washes as I work my way forward in layers. So the elements at the back receive the highest number of washes and ultimately fade away the most. The tricky part of working this way is to anticipate how dense or bold elements will be without having everything else in. After I finish a piece, I'll usually sleep on it for a day and look at it with fresh eyes in the morning. I might do small tweaks after that, but basically I like to sign it and move on to the next."

Other than painting, Dave has spent a lot of time taking photographs and doing comic-style illustration in pencil and ink over the years. In his

leisure time, he enjoys nights out with friends and family, and icy cold beer. Playing hockey, though, is his favourite outlet. Getting in touch with his inner child and letting the problems of the world slip away for an hour. Inevitably, that childish enthusiasm appears later on canvas, so real that you hear the skate blades scraping on the ice, the puck slapping the boards... and see your breath rising in the chilled air.

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above, A Paris Morning, oil on canvas, 30" x 48"

below, Delivering Ice, oil on canvas, 24" x 36"

