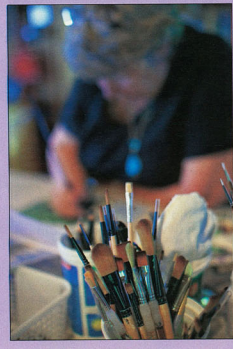


Island Artists Share their love of Muskoka



Article and photographs by Scott Turnbull

Each summer Thursday, in a tiny wooden cottage on the shores of Tobin Island, a group of friends are at their easels, recreating the natural splendour of Muskoka in a wash of brushstrokes.

The scene outside is a painter's paradise for nature studies – waves on water, sweeping summer skies, trees dancing in the wind and loons paddling close to shore.

With such inspiration literally at their doorstep, the group has created an epic body of work from this cottage-turned-studio, at the same time carrying on a 150-year tradition of expressing Muskoka's beauty through paint at the shore of the lake.

Known officially as the Tobin Island School of Fine Art, the informal gathering has been taking place for the past seven years at the Lake Rousseau cottage property of Loretta Rogers, wife of the late Ted Rogers, founder of telecommunications giant Rogers Communications.

A lifelong painter, Loretta Rogers was pursuing a career in art when she decided to "get married

instead."

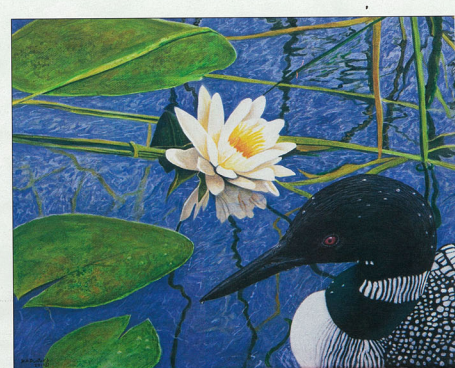
After having four children in just about as many years, the demands of family life took over. Rogers didn't start painting seriously again until about 15 years ago.

She picked up a brush again after meeting Darcey Silis, a fellow Tobin Island cottager who started working at the Rogers' cottage during the 1980s.

After discovering their mutual love of painting, the two started painting "en plein air" at the water's edge on the island, weighing down their easels to keep the wind off the lake from blowing them over.

These painting exercises continued through the winter's months at the Rogers' home in Nassau, Bahamas, where other friends joined Rogers and Silis.

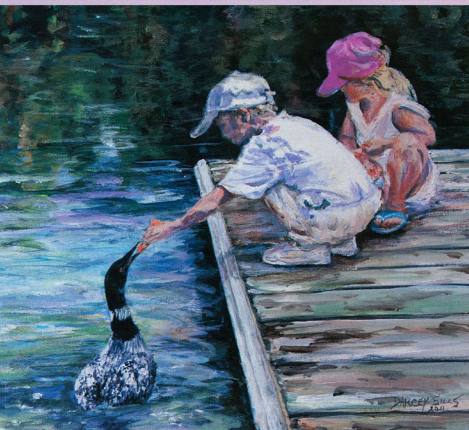
After an American painter bowed out of instructing the informal painting sessions, the group invited esteemed Muskoka artist Doug Dunford to Bahamas to help the painters hone



Visual artist Susan Gosevitz at work in the Tobin Island studio where the artists meet each week (left). The loon painting by Doug Dunford, is from *Larry the Loon*, a book illustrated by The Tobin Island School of Fine Arts (above). Dunford acts as their instructor but says he is learning as much as he is teaching from the artists in the group.



Making up the The Tobin Island School of Fine Art are Karen Genovese, Susan Gosevitz, Doug Dunford, Loretta Rogers, author Judith McMurray and Darcey Silis. The artists agree their work has been enriched by the experience of painting together.



Darcey Silis's illustration from *Larry the Loon* features children feeding the injured loon fresh salmon and crab legs as he is unable to catch his own food.

their techniques.

Dunford's work has helped define the modern representation of Muskoka. From his iconic images of Muskoka chains to whimsical boathouses, and with his love of nature, he was a perfect fit with the group.

"It's a really amazing group of painters," says Dunford. "I find myself learning way more than I'm teaching, and we all share new discoveries."

Other members of the group include Dwight Aranha, a Bahamian painter, Susan Gosevitz, a Toronto-based visual artist, and Karen Genovese, a Lake Rousseau cottager who came to the group after commissioning Dunford for a painting.

"While I was with Karen at her cottage, I saw some of her art, and told her about our group," explains Dunford. "I was really blown away. I introduced Karen to Loretta and the group, and we

all fell in love with her."

After the group was cemented, it was a chance encounter with one of Dunford's paintings in the Tobin Island studio that took the group from an informal art gathering to a school of published illustrators.

"I was visiting the studio on the island, and I was watching Dunford create a beautiful painting of an Inukshuk that sits on the shore of Lake Muskoka," says Judith McMurray, a Toronto-based writer.

"I told Doug that the Inukshuk needed a name, and asked if it was ok to call him 'Chucky'. I went home and wrote a children's story about Chucky, a very lonely Inukshuk, and we decided that the artists should illustrate it."

The painters spent most of their sessions in 2008 working on the canvases that would become the illustrations for *Chucky the Lonely Inukshuk*, which was published in 2009.

"I think that the story captured all of our imaginations, and our paintings evolved as the story did," says Rogers.

At the book's near completion, the group chose to use their work as a fundraiser for a cause that was close to home.

Two of Dunford's three sons live with juvenile diabetes, and the school decided to give all of the net proceeds from the book to the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation of Canada.

One of Dunford's sons, Simon who suffers from the disease, fittingly contributed a painting to the book, impressing the members so much with his talent that he was named a junior member of the Tobin Island School along with fellow junior member, Megan Torisawa.

With the success of *Chucky the Lonely Inukshuk*, it wasn't long until a story came along that inspired another collaboration.

Last summer, Gosevitz and her family discovered a loon injured by a boat in the bay near their cottage. The loon was unable to swim or fly, so the Gosevitzs offered the hungry bird some premium smoked-salmon, which he hungrily took.

"Larry the loon befriended us right away," says Susan Gosevitz. "The next thing I knew, my husband, Bernie, was going to the grocery store in Port Carling to get him king crab and herring."

After Gosevitz told the story of the injured loon to the studio group, Larry quickly became the focus of the art during the summer of 2010. Dunford took photos of the bird, which were used as studies for a series of pieces by the school that now illustrate *Larry the Loon*, the newest children's book by McMurray.

"When I went and saw Larry, I realized I'd never really gotten that close to a loon before," says Dunford.

"I was so fascinated by him that I painted him right away. I showed the painting to Loretta, and it all snowballed from there. We all started painting loons."

The just-published book tells the story of Larry with two endings: both the sad, real-life end of the tale, and a happier conclusion more palatable for young readers.

With a foreword by Robert Bateman that includes an image of his 1981 painting *Loon Family*, and a

drawing of Dr. Bernie Gosevitz by Toronto Sun editorial cartoonist Andy Donato, the book is a beautiful collection of artwork as well as a fun story for kids with an ecological message.

All profits from *Larry the Loon* are going to the Canadian Wildlife Federation, and the creators are hoping the book will encourage better stewardship for the cherished birds.

A public book launch is planned for August 14 at Rebecca's Fine Dining in Port Carling, with an accompanying silent auction of giclée prints of the paintings in the book, along with some originals up for sale.

This summer at the little wooden studio by the lake, the Tobin Island School artists are working on new pieces and getting ready for the book launch.

The artists all agree their art has been enriched by the experience of painting with each other.

"You can't really progress that much all on your own," says Rogers. "It's great having everyone here because we all learn from everybody else."

Darcey Silis echoes the sentiment. "We've all been to art school but working with the group and especially with Doug have made us all better," she says.

"He really helps tie together all those ends of technique and approach and we're lucky to have him here."

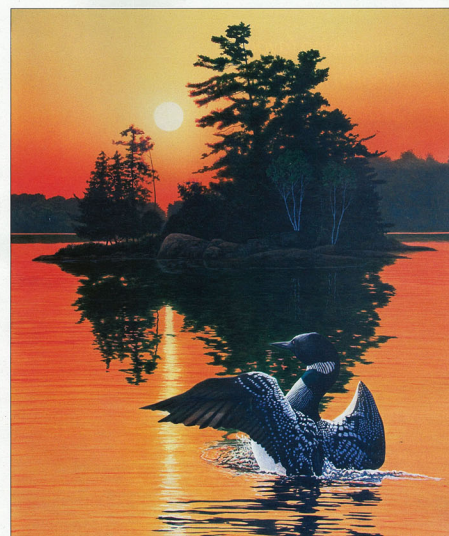
Susan Gosevitz acknowledges Rogers for being the driving force behind the group, from sharing her studio to providing inspiration with her dedication to painting.

"I really have to credit Loretta for bringing us all together in Muskoka," says Gosevitz.

"All of our work has revolved around nature and especially Muskoka, and we're lucky to be able to work in such a beautiful place."

The Thursday sessions at the lakeside studio have become a staple of summer life for the members of the Tobin Island School of Fine Art.

They are carrying on the more than a century old tradition of drawing artistic inspiration from the shores of Muskoka's lakes. **BY**



Doug Dunford's work is featured in the book (above). Artists are at work in the studio nestled in the trees on Tobin Island that was once a small cottage (below).

