

Art and the Modern Illuminist

by Daniel Richards

Have you ever stood in front of a work of art and felt absolutely nothing? I have, and too often, it was my own. Many artists look to one another for inspiration and guidance during our developing years but frequently, I found it difficult to drum up emotions for art outside of our national collections. Was I too hard on local artists or simply too fussy? Perhaps I was an art snob because of my background and was over discriminating on medium, subject or composition. One thing was certain;



ago, from the ground up. I went on to create one of Canada's first multimedia computerized exhibitions called *Magician of Light*. This was the first time a visitor could view a large portion of the Canadian collections using computers. I later installed the largest multimedia division in a



Daniel Richards, self portrait.
LEFT: *White Point Aspotogean 18 x 27* original screening by the artist.

little I had seen outside of a national institution impressed me enough to say, "I loved it." I liked it but the difference between like and love is whether it is coming home or not.

One day, all that changed when the impossible happened.

At the time, I was very privileged to have served as a senior division manager with the National Gallery of Canada (for nearly 20 years) and had the good fortune of working with artists from around the world, including masters such as Joseph Karsh and Michael Snow. I managed several key divisions and helped build the new NGC, some 15 years

Canadian museum. Paralleling this, I was also a painter, master printmaker and photographer for over 35 years, 20 of which were as a Modern Illuminist and 3Dimensionalist.

So what did happen that day? Well, I had just finished retooling my studio for the umpteenth time when I walked back into the dimly lit room and something abruptly caught my eye. I froze and, for the first time, experienced something called aesthetic arrest. I had heard of this but never felt it before; what caused this was a tiny work I had been developing, called *3 Cherries* — and for some reason it was literally glowing. It seemed back-lit and appeared to have energy

coming from within that stopped me dead in my tracks. This was impossible! There was no phosphorescence in my pigments (which would have faded rapidly and looked artificial). For a reason unknown to me at the time, the piece was efficiently reflecting light from a small lamp across the room. As I approached, the energy increased, passing through my psyche from head to toe. Involuntarily and without hesitation, I spoke those magic words: "I love it!"

With this simple exclamation, a mission was born that has caused me to burn the candle at both ends for over 35 years. I finally understood why there were so many starving artists in this world. Much of our work had little or no light!

It has been several decades since that day and, after many years of further development, I am happy to say that my collection possesses the power to induce aesthetic arrest in over 90% of the people who view this art. As a result, the words most often spoken in my gallery are "I love it!" What people actually love is the unique combination of an extraordinary amount of reflected light coupled with a well-executed and competent mastery of shape, form and composition. In the end, light separates these works from all others.

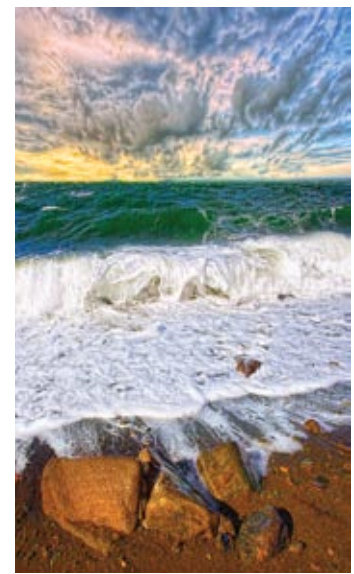
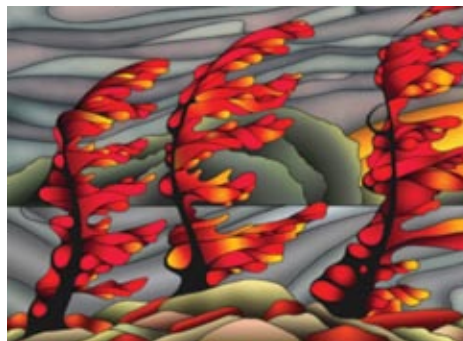
My art, as a master printmaker, is comprised of two distinct properties: mechanical and intellectual. Mechanical means a perfect balance between technique, technology, materials and the tools used to create each work. After all, I am a print maker. When these are united with the intellectual content — traditional shape, form, composition and subject — we have the most original and affordable artwork available today on canvas. If the abnormally high reflectivity of this art is maintained, along with the traditional play of light and shadow within the

modeling of the composition, then each work possesses the power to touch the human soul. Just one gaze affects many in an ethereal or spiritual way and when this happens, only then may I call myself a Modern Illuminist.

Centuries of illuminists were renowned for their ability to paint with light within their compositions, but the modern illuminist is a much different animal. We not only manipulate light and shadow cleverly, but we deliver much more reflected light from the surfaces of our works compared to any other art form in history. The visual dynamic range of these works includes something called High Dynamic Range light (HDR), each capable of reflecting most of the light that strikes their surface. This art will continue to do so for at least 200 years without fading, something rarely accomplished before. The net effect is to have an instant emotional connection with art, something many of us dream of but rarely experience.

Human vision can process a very wide dynamic range of natural light, having a black and white ratio between 1200 to 1. To understand this more easily: a film or a digital camera only has a dynamic range of 200 to 1, which is why, when in high contrast situations involving reflected daylight — we often over or under-expose our images. To prevent this, photo technology compresses the natural dynamic range of daylight. Classic art pigments suffer the same phenomena. A high degree of spectral compression results either by the technology or by the artist when interpreting a high-contrast scene from a compressed photograph — photographs inherently suffer dynamic range compression right out of the starting gate. Add to this, the slightest artistic timidity with colour and you have art that seems lifeless in comparison to the wide dynamic range of natural light we experience in the real world every day.

As a result, people who visit galleries too often leave uninspired and certainly do not hear the magic words “take me home.” If real love for art is to manifest itself within the human psyche, we need to interact with it at a physiological and emotional level. It would be extremely



Original screenings by the artist.
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *Autumn Light 2*, 32" x 31";
Three Lost Pines, 10" x 14"; *Bay of Fundy*
(Mighty Fundy Tide), 24" x 38".

rare for an inanimate two-dimensional object to inspire sufficient passion that is capable of inducing a feeling of love within a short period without a significant level of interaction. Even a piece of furniture — or a car for that matter — needs to have you sit in it, touch it and drive it. This is not the case with two-dimensional art. It just sits there staring you in the face.

To foster this kind of interaction in my gallery I give everyone a remote hand-held infrared dimmer that controls over 100 individually wired halogen lights all of which shine on each work. Every work of art can be viewed in a variety of lighting conditions between daylight and one half hour before sunset. This allows the viewer to push the limits of art and light resulting in an unforgettable experience. As light changes over each image, as it does every day in our homes, so does the flow of energy that reflects from its

surface and, if the amount of reflected light is high enough, it will summon passion from deep within the human soul. I have learned to use today's modern luminous pigments in a way that has allowed me as an artist to break free of the low dynamic range barriers that has plagued this generation of artists. My work is not then just real... it becomes hyper real. If you wish to experience this phenomenon in person, I invite you to visit me in at my Ottawa gallery.

It has been a life-long struggle to achieve what you will experience and I hope it is something you will never forget. Now that I am in my twilight years, the only thing that matters to me is whether people love this art. ■

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