

Kitchener artist channels his inner Homer Watson

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KITCHENER — As he canoed along Grand River, artist Robert Achtemichuk watched for a stand of pine trees that Homer Watson painted when he lived here more than 100 years ago.

For the past few months, Achtemichuk has been searching for the artistic route that the celebrated Canadian landscape painter would have taken.

He's painting the scenes that he believes Watson would have viewed back then, many of which are along Grand River.

"This is about way-finding and orienteering and trying to connect with something that happened a long time ago," Achtemichuk says.

His paintings will be his response to "being in Homer Watson land."

Homer Ransford Watson was born in the village of Doon, now part of Kitchener, in 1855.

Watson was often called the "Canadian Constable" because his painting style was reminiscent of British landscape artist John Constable.

He rose "to celebrity status after the inaugural exhibition of the newly formed Royal Canadian Academy," says the website for Homer Watson House & Gallery on Old Mill Road in Kitchener, which was Watson's home until his death in 1936.

Watson's career took off when Canada's then-governor general bought one of his paintings, "The Pioneer Mill," in 1880 as a gift for Queen Victoria. A second Watson painting also hangs in Windsor Castle.

Achtemichuk is an accomplished artist whose works have been exhibited in galleries across Canada. They're also in many private and public collections, including the Winnipeg Art Gallery and the National Library in Paris, France.

Most recently, he is known for his hushed nighttime paintings of the world as he views it from the backyard of his Kitchener home. In his paintings, the moon glows, crows bob on branches of trees, dark trees are silhouetted against snow-topped roofs.

He was looking for a change of scenery when he embarked on the Homer Watson orienteering project.

Watson loved nature, as Achtemichuk does. Watson's appreciation of the trees around Kitchener interests Achtemichuk.

"I'm a tree hugger," says Achtemichuk, interviewed in his home studio. "I'm always looking for ways of



Artist Robert Achtemichuk paints a sycamore tree in his neighbourhood.



Artist Robert Achtemichuk is painting scenes like this one of the Grand River, which he believes may also have been painted by Canadian landscape artist Homer Watson.

grounding myself. Maybe trees are part of that affinity."

He's noticing more and more mature trees in the region are being destroyed to make room for development.

Achtemichuk discovered in his research that Watson helped save Cressman's Woods in the 1920s.

"He and some councillors got together and said we need to save the woods from being developed. It's now part of Homer Watson Park which is beside Homer Watson art gallery."

Achtemichuk is combining his interest in Watson and trees in two projects for which he received a \$6,500 grant from the Region of Waterloo Arts Fund.

Until May, 2015, Achtemichuk will attempt to retrace some of Watson's steps and paint his own impression of what Watson might have seen. Achtemichuk's paintings will be exhibited at Homer Watson Gallery next summer.

"I'm not trying to do the exact spot or copy the paintings. I'm just following his footsteps, but it might be five feet over or I might be choosing a different scene that's still along the Grand," he says.

At the same time, he will paint portraits of fine, old trees around Waterloo Region.

In September, Achtemichuk canoed along Grand River, from Freeport to Blair, with his adult son, Sasha.

"I was looking for beeches and pine stands on the Grand," he says.

Charlie Hill, recently retired curator of Canadian art at the National Gallery of Canada told him that Watson painted a lot toward Blair, which was downstream from his house in Doon, he says.

"He says Homer did more paintings south along the Grand into Blair and into Cambridge than going north into Waterloo. No one knows why."

Achtemichuk says he and Sasha found a stand of pines along the river that is in one of Watson's paintings, now in the collection of Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, called "Moonlight along the Grand."

Achtemichuk painted the scene from his canoe and on shore. He doesn't use an easel, preferring instead to put a plastic sheet on the ground and sit on a rock or stump. He paints on thin washi paper set on top of a portfolio case covered in felt to absorb the extra moisture.

He plans to take his car to search along the Grand from Cambridge to Paris for two stands of pine trees on both sides of the river that Watson painted.

To do his research, he's going to art galleries, studying old maps of Doon at Kitchener Public Library, interviewing people, looking at Google Earth, reading Watson's letters kept at the gallery.

Achtemichuk has never been lost in the bush, and he records longitude and latitude so others can visit the spots.

His uncanny sense of direction might come partly from a childhood spent on a Saskatchewan farm where he and his dog would set out to explore the fields. "I followed the dog home," he says, smiling.

However, much has changed in Kitchener since Watson's time.

It's proving a challenge to find and reach the sites. Suburbs and malls have sprung up; a lot of the land that Watson walked is now private; views are obscured by big homes.

"I haven't resolved for myself yet, walking out of the bushes into suburban sprawl."

He hasn't found cows in Doon area of Kitchener, but there are "lots of cows" in Watson's paintings.

Achtemichuk is enjoying the opportunity to use colour, particularly green. His paintings of nocturnal scenes from his backyard feature mostly blue with spots of yellow.

"One reason I paint is because I like colour. This whole project has taught me how to use green."

He doesn't take photographs from which to refer later at home, preferring instead to be "present" in the woods

and "drawing live." The wind, the smells, the squawk of a blue jay, the sight of chickadees; all contribute to his impressions, he says. He makes notes in his notebook.

"When I come out in the bushes, I'm present in an experience. When I have a photo, I'm illustrating a document. That's the difference for me.

"It's a challenge because I don't want to paint realistically. I just want to be there and give my impression of what I'm seeing."

Achtemichuk blogs about his journey in Homer Watson land at www.robortachtemichuk.ca.

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