



Seeking the Spirit

written by Brett Anningson

admires are Fritz Thaulow and Frederick Waugh for their classical water and seascapes that seem to capture the world in a way we no longer can.

Ray says, "Although there are some fine contemporary landscape artists working today, the quality and sheer volume of work produced in that era by high level artists, many of whom are still relatively unknown, is a long way from being equaled or surpassed. The fact



left, *Frozen Over, Cottle Lake*, oil on board, 14.5" x 8"

left, *Ebb and Flow*, oil on canvas, 10" x 30"

There is something dream-like that leads you into a Ray Ward painting. A sense that there is something else, lying just beyond the horizon, which you cannot yet see. Stunning realism given a depth that goes beyond sight; allowing the viewer to experience how the artist feels the scene.

"As a representational painter, I am always trying to balance artistic expression with being truthful to my chosen subject," Ray explains. "I think the paintings that most successfully combine these qualities are the ones where technical aspects aren't stumbling blocks, therefore allowing me to focus on capturing what I perceive to be the spirit of a place. I want viewers to get a sense of that. As I continue to grow as a painter, I aspire to be more efficient and skillful at conveying my vision with paint."

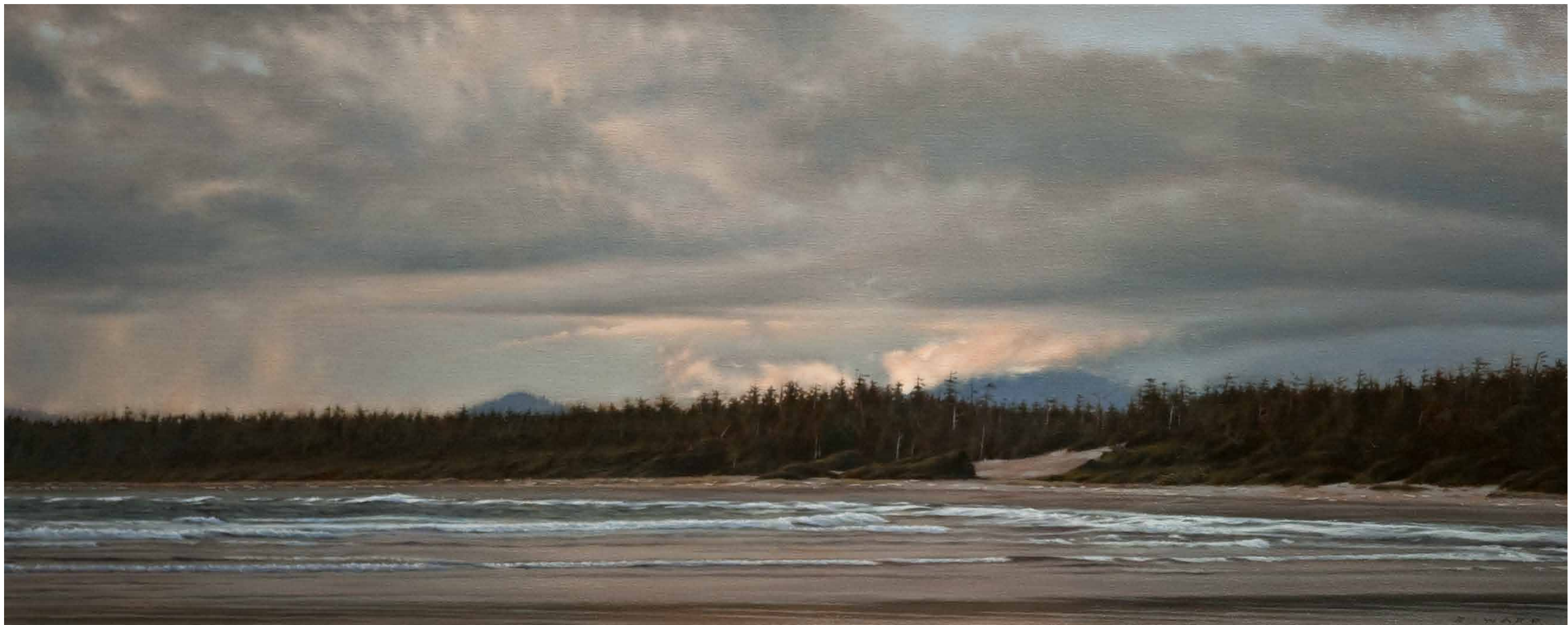
His earliest artistic influence, Robert Bateman, has remained Ray's strongest influence. Soon after, he discovered other painters like Alex Colville and Winslow Homer. As his artistic thought progressed, Ray found himself drawn to 19th-century landscape art, particularly Frederic Church of the Hudson River School and Russian landscape painters, such as Ivan Shishkin. Other 19th century artists he

that they achieved such high quality without the technology available today is even more astounding. My goal is to get as close as I can with my art to that degree of painting."

He adds, "I am inspired by nature and the beauty of the changing landscape; by light, season, time of day and weather. I revel in the fact that I can walk to the same place dozens of times in a month, season or year and it's different every time. It provides me with plenty of material to work with when I find a special place to visit. I thank my dog Java for helping me find these places – he demands at least two walks a day and we often search for new places to explore together. I have a lifetime's worth of ideas for paintings right here where I live, one of the most beautiful places on earth, but there are other places I want to paint too, namely other parts of BC, Alberta and the US."

It All Comes Naturally

Ray grew up in the Comox Valley of British Columbia on a five-acre hobby farm. His parents were not particularly artistic, but Ray's dad could



Storm Break, Coastal Dunes, oil on canvas, 16" x 40"

sketch and had musical talent. Their real gift was letting Ray be Ray. He would leave in the morning and spend the day outside exploring.

He explains, "I always had a fascination with nature and the many creatures found in forests and ponds. Some of these creatures showed up in my drawings, and later in paintings. I developed an interest in art early on and by my teens I had the idea I would be an artist when I finished school. Wildlife art was my passion and it was growing in popularity with many great artists to admire. I knew that it wouldn't be an easy road, however."

When a good friend mentioned an uncle who was making a living as a commercial artist, Ray decided this career would offer him the best

of both worlds – artistic endeavor and food on the table. Life went mostly to plan; he moved to Vancouver to attend art college and went on to freelance illustration. This did not last, as Ray struggled with short deadlines and the fading need for traditional illustration in a world increasingly reliant on computer graphics.

"Next thing I knew I was working in stone masonry and landscaping during the day and painting in oils at night," he recalls. "My landscapes were inspired by other genres I saw in art school, and it wasn't too long until I found representation at a Vancouver gallery. This was in my late twenties and by my mid-thirties I quit my day job to work full-time as a fine artist."

The Art of Adventure

"My wife and I traveled extensively before we had our son in 2011," says Ray. "We've been to Europe several times, Central and South America, Hawaii and Mexico. Our biggest trip was an eight month journey through Europe, Australia and Southeast Asia in 1997. Some of the highlights were: traveling by ferry through Indonesia seeing Komodo Dragons on Komodo Island and Orangutans in Sumatra; buying a car in Australia and driving to Darwin; hiking through a park in Thailand where tigers roamed. For several years after that trip, I painted scenes of Venice and other European towns. They sold well in galleries."

Hiking and camping continue to dominate the family adventures. The encounters these days are

a little tamer – usually with birds and squirrels and occasionally a black bear. "However," Ray points out, "on one of our trips to Cape Scott on the northern tip of Vancouver Island, we encountered wolves on the hike back to the parking lot. It was a close encounter, 20 feet away. Java, our boxer, had attracted the attention of a large wolf that was following us. After I made repeated attempts to scare it off, it seemed to disappear. We then heard it howling, and 15 minutes later it was back with two more wolves following us on the trail. I threw rocks and yelled at them and they finally left, but it was a frightful and hurried hike back to our car 14 kilometers away. We made it back in almost half the time it took us to hike in."

Today, Ray and his wife live in Nanaimo where





previous spread, *Morning Stillness*, oil on board, 11.5" x 17"
left top, *Lifting Fog, Boulder Beach*, oil on board, 8.5" x 15"
left bottom, *Shoreline in Ethereal Light*, oil on canvas, 48" x 60"

right top, *Winds of Change*, oil on birch, 24" x 30"
right bottom, *Promontory in Fading Light*, oil on canvas, 16" x 40"



above, *Autumn Oaks on the Marsh*, oil on birch, 10" x 12"



right top, *Beyond the Reeds, Buttertubs Marsh*, oil on canvas, 12" x 36"
right bottom, *November Fog*, oil on birch, 12" x 12"



he devotes full-time hours to his passion for art. He has perfected his own style of realism – moving through a more impressionistic bent before realizing his heart was in the beauty of realism. Having worked in acrylics, watercolour, gouache, pastels and even coloured pencil, Ray always returns to oils, his favourite medium because of its luminosity, versatility and forgiveness.

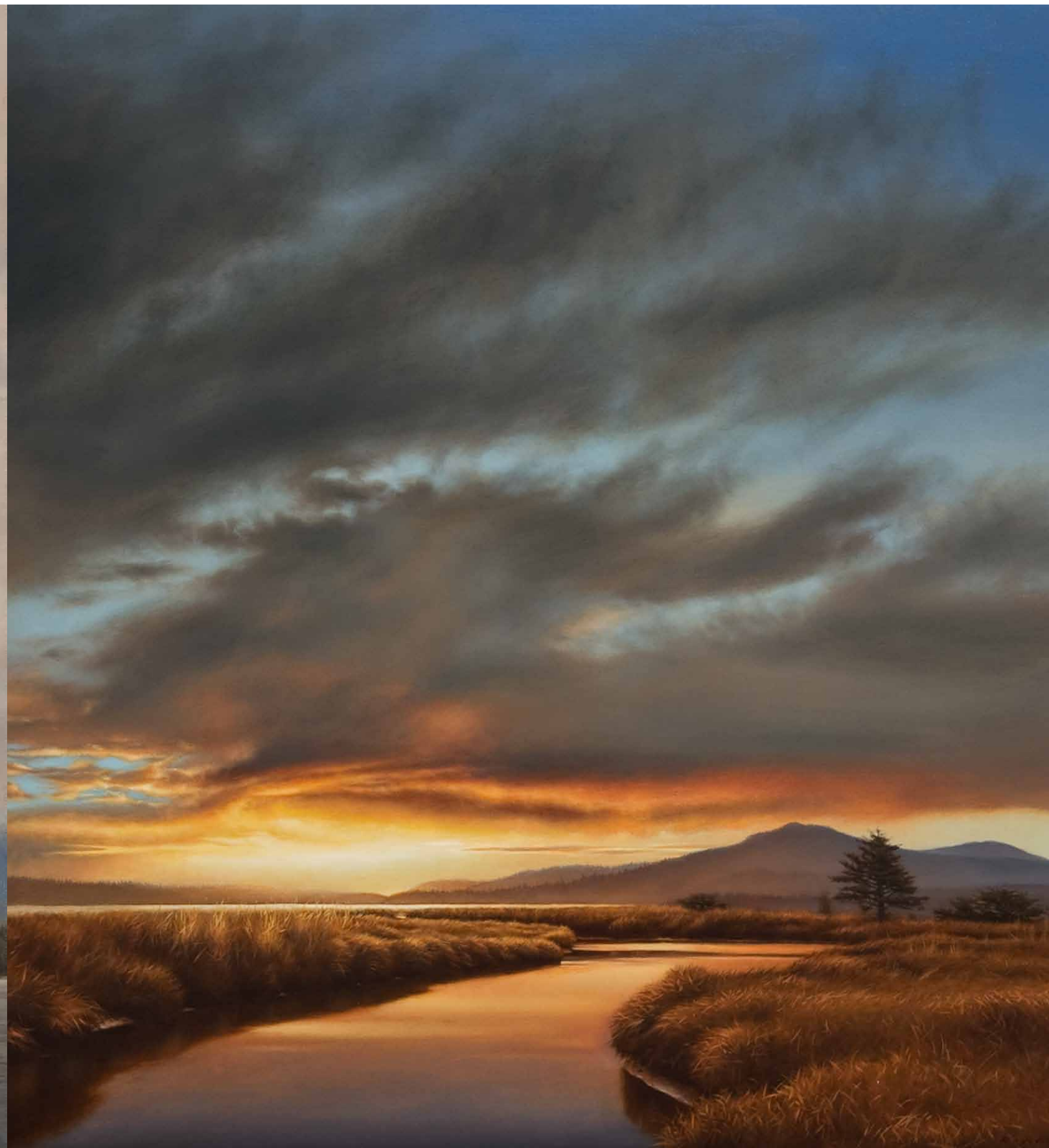
"I paint in oils in an indirect method," he explains, "meaning I don't finish a painting in one session. I start with an imprimatur in umber and work from background to foreground on top of that. Sometimes I do a quick drawing to establish the design and other times I start in paint without a drawing, it depends on the size and complexity of the piece. The painting is built

up in layers of thin paint, glazes and scumbles. I work from thumbnail sketches, photos and notes. I occasionally do plein air painting, primarily for fun and learning and not usually to sell."

Most of the scenes come from a combination of photos taken by Ray, imagination and memory. "Experience has enabled me to improvise much more convincingly in a painting than I could five or ten years ago," he confesses. "A deeper understanding of values, light and my subject matter can be attributed to this progression, as does careful observation and studying the work of masters."

Ray's studio is a 200 sq. ft. outbuilding beside the house. It is wired, heated and has an older hi-fi stereo that fills the space with rich sound. "The





previous spread, *Winter Sun, Study*, oil on birch, 10" x 12"
left top, *Islet, Central Coast*, oil on birch, 24" x 24"
left bottom, *Encore*, oil on birch, 36" x 36"



Tidal Marsh in Autumn Light, oil on birch, 10" x 9"

music is always on when I'm painting," he laughs, "to make the experience even more enjoyable. Mostly '60s-'90s rock, folk rock and alternative rock. I like that it's a separate building from the house, that way I won't disturb anyone with my music and I have privacy to focus on my work."

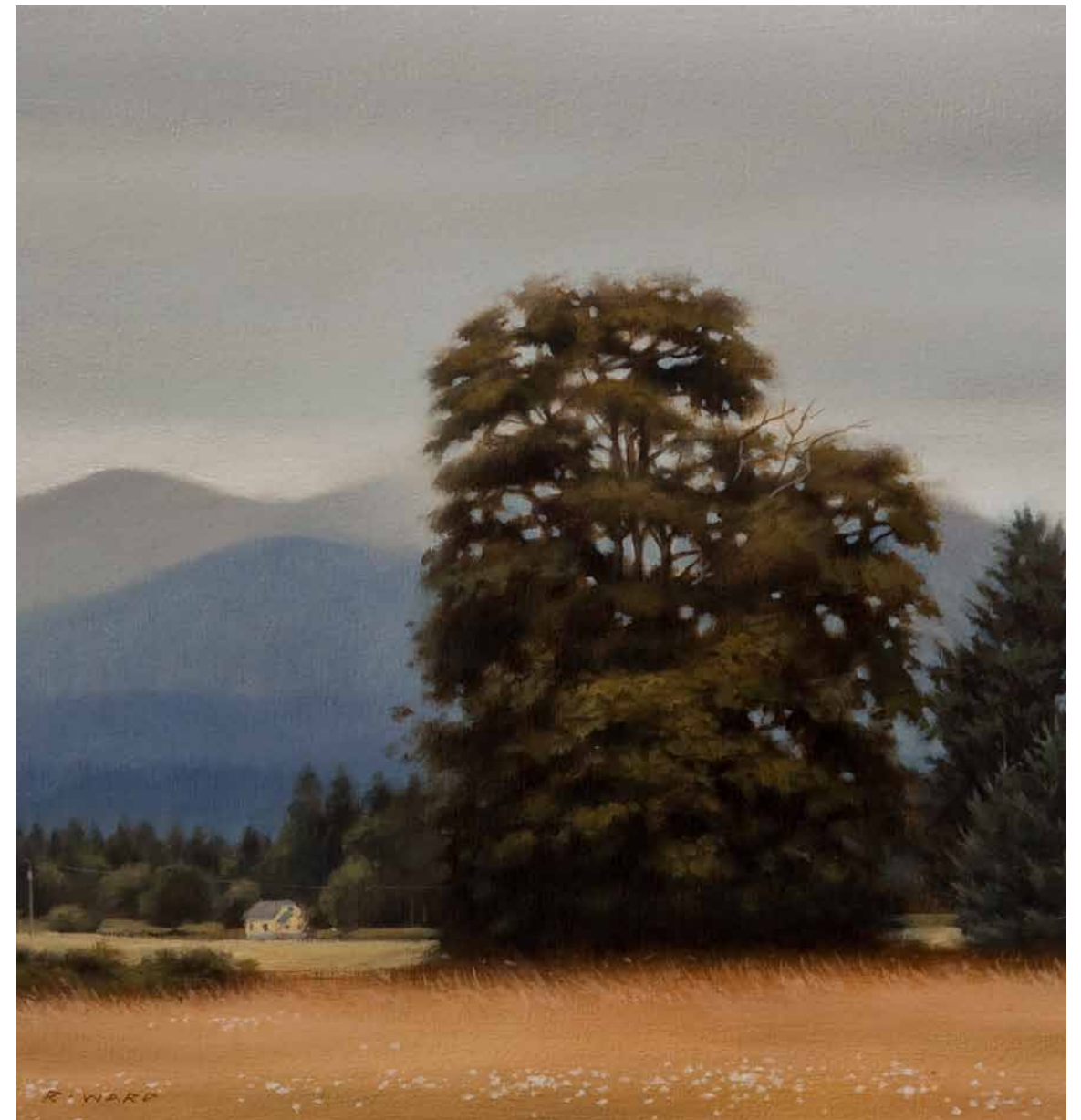
The Trail Ahead

An elderly collector once confronted Ray at an art show and said, "I see you've changed your style. Have you ever heard the saying, If it ain't broke, don't fix it?" He had previously purchased an impressionistic painting from Ray and didn't appreciate the more realistic work on exhibit. Ray was embarrassed at the time, but he believes that artistic vision develops as the artist grows and matures. There will never be a time when it

remains the same.

To beginners on the artistic journey, Ray advises: Work hard, follow your heart and vision, and don't give up – unless you don't enjoy it anymore. It is a difficult road and in order to survive you have to make a name for yourself and earn a reputation. If it is truly your heart's desire, you need to follow it.

"My art is a big part of my life," he concludes, "and I'm always looking for ways to grow and improve it. I consider myself a lifelong student, I don't want to stagnate. I sometimes wonder how my work will look in ten years, and how I'll feel about what I'm doing now. I am fortunate to have a supportive and understanding wife who has always been there for me on this journey. It has been a bumpy road at times. I can't imagine



The Old Oak, oil on birch, 8" x 8"

doing anything else, though, this is the life that I dreamed of as a kid. I feel privileged. Sometimes I think to myself, 'If I can't make a living at this anymore, what would I do? Who would hire me?' It's a scary thought. Scary enough to keep me working hard to be a better painter."

Ray is represented by:

Peninsula Gallery

Sidney, BC
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250.655.1282

White Rock Gallery

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www.whiterockgallery.com
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Wetland Silence, oil on birch, 20" x 20"