

Newfoundland outport scene at local gallery

When Earls Court Gallery relocated from Hess Village to Ottawa Street in 2009, it added approximately 3 times more floor and wall space. The Crown Point neighbourhood gained a successful commercial gallery with two exhibition rooms, as well as framing services. The larger gallery hosts temporary monthly exhibits of work by guest artists. Art from the gallery's collection is displayed for longer periods in the smaller space and includes prints, sculpture and paintings by a range of regional artists.

Among the pieces on display this spring and summer is a watercolour by David Blackwood, "Grey River, SW Coast, NFLD". The 25" x 19" landscape format painting is a wonderful example of the qualities of wet in wet washes in watercolour. The cloudy sky sets the tone for the rugged cliffs, distant river mouth and quiet settlement below. The artist is giving us a high angle view of a coastal village wharf with bunkhouses and similar buildings that hint at fishery and perhaps other industry, looking down on a bay and out to the sea. There are only a few small boats in the harbour, and no people in sight. The composition leads the viewer's eye along the curving river, meeting a mountain peak close to the centre of the picture plane where we see a few houses in the low bay. Beyond the harbour, the river narrows and we follow it along toward a glimpse of the sea on the horizon.

Blackwood, who considers himself a "visual storyteller," is probably best known for his depictions of outport life in Newfoundland. My personal favourites are his prints of mummers. An ancient theatrical parade, mumming evolved from pre-Christian rituals of death and revival into a Newfoundland Christmas celebration involving masks, costumes, food and drink in the midst of winter. "Grey River, SW Coast, NFLD" presents a completely different subject matter, but creates a similar mythical mood. In blue, grey and brown tones the artist narrates human activity without actually depicting people at all, and sets the small cluster of industry against a stark natural background. Is everyone out to sea, or have they left for the season? Perhaps you will find the answers when you see the painting in person (and in colour). Earls Court Gallery is open Tuesday to Friday from 10 am to 5 pm, and Saturday 10 am to 4 pm.

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