



I was looking for something quite different when I first saw a painting by France Jodoin.

I had gone to the Musée des beaux-arts de Sherbrooke, curious to see again the works by Coburn that were in storage at the Musée. When the Musée opened in its new location on Dufferin Street in 1996, it was with a Coburn retrospective and the top-most of its three floors was entirely given over to Coburn, from his early sketches to an unfinished canvas that came from his Melbourne studio after his death. The permanent Coburn exhibit takes no more than a quarter of the top floor of the Musée. I saw the show in 1996 and I wanted to refresh my memory and glance at whatever Coburns might be kept in the vaults. There was one painting in particular that I wanted to see again: I remember it as unfinished, a big canvas of greens and browns, a woodland scene done in a style that was almost pointillism.

Sarah Boucher was kind enough to give me a few hours of her time to let me see what is expensively kept in a temperature and humidity-controlled environment in what once housed the safety deposit boxes of The Eastern Townships Bank, an institution that Coburn possibly used, though most probably he'd have done his banking at the Richmond branch, across the river from his home in Melbourne, at least when he wasn't in Montreal. I was a little disappointed by the Coburns I saw in storage: fewer in number

than I expected and somehow, of lesser quality than I had remembered, and no sign of the painting I wanted to see. Many of the works on display in 1996 had come from private collections and it made perfect sense that that painting in particular would have been kept by the family, or perhaps been sold by the family to a collector. My disappointment was mitigated by the fact that there were infinitely more paintings in the vaults than I had imagined and a number of these were paintings that made me want to stop and linger. Not that any of these were hung for easy viewing. They were suspended from metal poles that slid out from overhead, the way carpets might be sold in a store; they were eased into narrow cupboards; drawings were stored flat between layers of acid-free paper in three-inch high drawers. Pulling a painting half way into a narrow passageway and craning your neck as far back from the extended arm that's holding the painting is hardly viewing at its best. Still, there was a lot to see.

Perhaps the most intriguing work was a relatively large canvas, perhaps four or five feet square, done in pale, fog-like, blue-tinted greys but intersected by a thin bit of red that seemed to be trying to emerge from the surrounding mist. I could almost imagine a poorly furled mast emerging from the diffused light of early dawn. It was both very modern and somehow reminiscent of Turner.

I was surprised when Sarah Boucher told me the artist lived in Cowansville.

A few months later, I went to visit France Jodoin at the eastern edge of the Townships and was just as surprised by a painting which hung in one of the living rooms of her stately and spacious nineteenth-century home. It was a large painting (occupying a full wall, almost from the baseboards up to crown mouldings of the nine-foot ceiling), and made larger by a heavy, somewhat baroque, century-old frame. The painting itself was dark: a black horse emerging from a dark background. Unlike France's painting at the Musée which was so lightly covered with paint that the texture

of the canvas was still perceptible, the paint on this canvas was slathered on, millimetres thick.

The painting, France told me, was by her husband, Kevin Sonmor.

In a world where even limited success is often very elusive, France Jodoin has accomplished much in a relatively short period of time. An artist who now calls Cowansville home, France Jodoin has paintings on exhibit in Calgary, Ottawa, Boston, Atlanta, and Paris.

“We’ve settled in Cowansville largely because of this house,” says the artist who grew up just outside of Saint-Hyacinthe. “I’m not a city girl even though I lived in Montreal for several years.”

The house—a comfortable, century-old brick structure with wood-panelled walls and a spacious attic that’s been converted into a studio—features, among other things, a baby grand piano which France plays almost daily. “I studied piano for eight or nine years and I most often play the music of classical composers like Bach or Chopin,” France says.

One of eight children, France grew up with music, art, and jigsaw puzzles.

“My father taught math,” France says, “but he liked to draw. My mother had a talent for interior decorating, and for gardening. There’s a definite artistic streak in the family. My twin brother—who teaches math—builds sound systems and is something of an aural artist. Several of us play music. One of my sisters is a painter, another created costumes for the theatre, and another is a landscaper.”

“When we were growing up,” she continues, “we always had sketchpads and art supplies in the house, so everybody drew. We also grew up with jigsaw puzzles that we all worked on. I think puzzles contributed to my affinity for colour and shape.”

After finishing Cégep (unique to Quebec, the Collège d’enseignement général et professionnel is an intermediate step between

high school and university), France enrolled in the translation program at the University of Ottawa, graduated, and remained there for the next fifteen years because there was a lot of work for a translator.

In 1996 she returned to Quebec, a move which unexpectedly led to the first step of her artistic journey.

“My sister, Sophie, was teaching an art course at the Sadie Bronfman Centre,” France recalls. “She suggested that I might be interested in attending a class and perhaps taking the course. This is a very vivid memory. It was a Wednesday evening. I walked into the class and something happened to me that had never happened before: I completely lost the sense of time. I walked in and all of a sudden, it was three hours later. It was like an epiphany. It had somehow put me in contact with something visceral inside of me.”

For the next three years, she lived in rural villages in the hinterland of Saint-Hyacinthe, continuing to take courses at the Sadie Bronfman Centre, and giving more and more of her spare time to painting. In 2000, she moved to Montreal. She started cutting back on the amount of translation work that she was doing. The extra time was given over to painting.

“From time to time,” she says, “I would organize my own show. I’d rent a hall, hang my work, do some promotion, and spend the month at the hall with my paintings.” While she was not the only painter using this method to show—and sell—paintings, it was a demanding and exhausting approach that always carried a certain financial risk.

In 2005, not long after her father’s death, France Jodoin’s work came to the attention of the owner of an Ottawa art gallery in an unusual way. “I had painted a series of small portraits and I’d gone to a shop to get them framed. They were in view when Pierre-Luc St-Laurent came in and saw them. He liked them, and I had a solo show at the St-Laurent & Hill gallery the following year.”

The following year was the start of a new life for France and her partner, the painter Kevin Sonmor. They moved from Montreal to the big, comfortable house in Cowansville.

The solo show in Ottawa had led to a second show—in Calgary.

“A painter friend came to the Ottawa show,” France recalls, “and spoke about it to his gallery in Calgary. In turn, the Calgary gallery included some of my work in The Affordable Art Show held in New York, where it caught the eye of the owner of an art gallery in Atlanta, and she started to carry my work. I had a showing in Montreal which led to my work being carried by a gallery in Paris, which in turn led to a gallery in Boston asking to sell my work.

“I’m very grateful,” she continues. “I’m grateful to the galleries that show my work, and to the people who buy my paintings and live with them. It makes me feel very proud and also very humble.”

France Jodoin works in oils and stretches her own linen (as opposed to cotton) canvases over wooden frames constructed in Montreal. She paints daily, normally a six-hour stint from one o’clock until seven. Mornings are given over to preparatory work—stretching a canvas, applying gesso—and to other pursuits like playing the piano. Evenings are focused on tasks such as answering emails, or reading—in particular nineteenth-century classics such as Dickens and Balzac (although she also reads detective fiction and historical novels).

Any given canvas—these range in size from twelve inches by twelve inches to six feet by twelve feet (anything bigger could not be carried out of the attic)—begins with size and colour. “Those are the only two things I decide before starting,” she says. “I chose how big the canvas is going to be and the starting colour, even if, by the time I finish, there may not be a single speck of the starting colour left in the painting.”

“I’m not Cartesian,” she explains. “I don’t start from a pre-conceived idea. If I start out with an idea in mind, the painting



inevitably goes wrong. My painting is intuitive and instinctive. I seem to need ambiguity and contrast: light and dark; realism and the abstract. I want a painting to be representative enough that a viewer can see, for example, a figure in a dress, or a boat on the water, but at the same time I'm not interested in trying to replicate a scene."

"I'm a person who needs space," she continues. "It's because I need space that I love my attic studio—the high ceiling gives me the impression of openness. That is also why I prefer the ocean to the forest. I like to work on big canvases; I do smaller ones as well, and go back and forth between the two, but it's the large format that appeals to me."

A number of France Jodoin's paintings, including the two owned by the Musée des beaux-arts de Sherbrooke, might be described as seascapes. "It's ironic," she says with a smile. "I don't know why so many of my paintings have to do with water, because I don't like water, I'm afraid of water. Yet it turns up in many of my paintings."

Reflecting on her current situation she says, "I feel very fortunate, very privileged to be able to lead the life that I lead. It's as if I came at the right time and to the right place. I'm blessed that I am able to do what I do. In my work, in my atelier, I enjoy myself. I lose track of time. I let things flow. Whatever I say through my work comes of its own."

I don't yet own a Jodoin but if ever I do, I imagine I'll try to hang it somewhere near my Nortcliffe. Both Dave Nortcliffe and France Jodoin spread very little pigment on their canvas so that it's the texture of the material rather than paint that's most evident. Both seem to favour muted tones, as if whatever appears in the painting does so through a fine mist or a slight fog. And both artists produce works that seem to straddle whatever line might exist between the representational and the abstract.