



Angela Lorenzen: Renaissance Woman

written by Kylie Serebrin

There are those who argue that all individuals are dominantly left brained or right brained. Fundamentally, they maintain, one may be either logical or imaginative; analytical or intuitive; an observer or a feeler; a word wizard or a master of colour and design. For proponents of this theory, artist Angela Lorenzen provides a fascinating enigma, challenging the polarization of critical

in painting and I remember being taken to her weekly oil painting classes in Thamesford, Ontario as a pre-schooler," Angela recalls. "I too enjoyed drawing and being creative as a child and many of my elementary school teachers recognized my aptitude for these activities, but I was never enrolled in any extracurricular art classes myself." Although her talent for drawing and painting was observed at an early age, she was also extremely successful academically and was encouraged by her family to pursue the sciences because they offered the promise of a more financially stable career.

Thus, after high school, Angela spent 9 years in university earning undergraduate and graduate degrees, culminating in the achievement of her PhD in Biology from the University of Ottawa in 2001. Subsequently she was employed as a



left, *J*, acrylic on panel, 32" x 20", 2012

above, *Wash Stand - Eldon House*, acrylic on panel, 12" x 28", 2012

thinking and creativity – or science and art – at its core. Following in the footsteps of Paulo Uccello, Piero della Francesca, Fillippo Brunelleschi, Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Durer, Angela belongs to a rare lineage of brilliant scientists, inventors, doctors and mathematicians who were also some of art history's most insightful, visionary and talented painters.

Like her exceptional paintings, Angela's path to becoming a professional artist was far from ordinary. "My mother always had an interest

toxicologist for the Canadian Wildlife Service and Agriculture Canada, and as a research associate in a laboratory dedicated to the study of Alzheimer's disease at the Robarts Research Institute at the University of Western Ontario. Amidst her outstanding scientific achievements and contributions, Angela frequently escaped her professional life through drawing and painting, slowly discovering and developing her signature High-Realism style.

In 1993, Angela made the decision to educate



above, *Eldon House Bath*, acrylic on panel, 28" x 20", 2012

her artistic side as well, joining her first formal painting class – a group that met weekly in Manotick, Ontario under the instruction of Ottawa-based Realist, Rikki Cameron. This endeavour was a turning point that opened Angela's eyes to her dual-identity as an artist. She acknowledges, "Not only did Rikki encourage me to create paintings with even greater detail and higher finish, she encouraged me to become proficient at photography, which I needed as a means of recording the details of my perceptions for use later in my studio. She also introduced me to the owner of a local art gallery where I sold what I consider to be my first significant painting, *The Dark Horse*." Created under Rikki Cameron's tutelage, *The Dark Horse* was based on a compilation of three reference photographs Angela had taken at various times and places: a melancholic dead tree, a neighbour's stunning black horse and a sublimely disquieting storm cloud descending upon the Saskatchewan countryside.

"After selling *The Dark Horse*, I started to spend an increasing amount of time painting.



above, *Repose*, acrylic on panel, 28" x 20", 2012
right, *Spirit Lamp*, acrylic on panel, 24" x 18", 2012

Though I was still working in a laboratory full-time, I began entering art shows, consigning pieces to various galleries and selling paintings regularly," Angela explains. "The shows were always more meaningful for me than sales, I started to win awards consistently in shows that were juried by experts from diverse backgrounds – from commercial gallery owners and public gallery curators to contemporary artists – and this was the most significant indication to me that, despite my minimal formal training, I was on the right track."

By 2009, Angela's science and art careers were both flourishing to the point where she had to choose one over the other on which to focus her time and energy. With the encouragement of her husband, Hans, she chose painting as her full-time profession. Initially, this felt like an extremely difficult compromise, however, Angela soon realized that her scientific training in technique, perseverance and logical thought would continue to thrive, proving as invaluable for her painting process as her emotional impressions and





intuition when conceptualizing and developing her compositions.

"To keep my mind challenged, I prefer to tackle a broad spectrum of subject matter. My subjects range from landscape to animals and from architecture to still lifes. I particularly enjoy overcoming their respective technical difficulties," Angela confides. "For a number of years I avoided painting water, but as I became more confident in my technical abilities I began to appreciate the challenge and started seeking out scenes with water in all its different moods and colours." One subject Angela reveals she has little interest in painting is the human figure. "For me, a painting's human subject should be the person looking at the image I have painted. I want the viewer to experience what I perceived and felt when I saw the scene, and I want them to understand why I was inspired to paint it."

Although Angela paints a wide variety of subjects, she notes a common bond exists among all of them. "Each of my paintings, no matter the scene, was kindled by the emotional and intellectual response I had when I first viewed the object or animal. I now find I am always actively seeking the moment of inspiration that will become my next painting; whether it be the effect of light on a landscape, the posture of an animal or the presence of something entirely intangible." When she serendipitously stumbles upon such an epiphanic moment Angela recognizes it instantly and snaps a photograph. She will later pour over the photograph in her studio, contemplating and analyzing why the scene left her spellbound in terms of its composition, colour and lighting.

The studio where Angela theoretically dissects her photographs might accurately be described as a laboratory for the research and creation of art. "I'm extremely organized by nature," she recognizes, "so I'm not inclined towards clutter of any kind in my studio space. I do have a bookshelf containing a number of technical reference books as well as books featuring works by other artists. The texts I consult most frequently and find most valuable are those related to the development of compositions using mathematical approaches – particularly dynamic symmetry."

She also keeps a computer with a photo-quality printer and most of her photographs (taken over the



above, *Yellow*, acrylic on panel, 17" x 12", 2012
left, *Mirror*, acrylic on panel, 30" x 20", 2012

past 15-20 years) in her studio. "My photographs are my most valued resource. They provide a record of detail that I can refer to again and again while planning a painting and consult once the painting is underway," Angela explains. Lastly, since her style of painting involves an extended period of technical work, Angela's studio contains a library of electronic audio books to keep her company while she works. "I particularly enjoy the superbly written classical literature of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Dickens. These authors – along with my Siberian huskies, Kes and Kira – are my painting companions," she confides.

Once Angela has identified the profoundly expressive elements of her photographs, she begins to redefine the composition by sketching numerous small versions so she can consider the various possibilities and sort out what she wants to include and exclude from her painting. She also considers the composition from a mathematical viewpoint, attempting to optimize focal points and determine the ideal proportions for the scene.



left, *Transition*, acrylic on panel, 34" x 24", 2012

right, *Laundry*, acrylic on panel, 24" x 16", 2012

"I once read that while one takes a photograph, one makes a painting, and I believe this to be true. What I end up sketching from a photograph will always be slightly different than what any other artist might draw from it, since I choose to emphasize those aspects of the scene that were significant for me. In fact, the element that will become the crux of a painting is often something that never made it into the photograph at all, but rather something related to my memory of the time and place where the photograph was taken. My paintings are intended to communicate an attitude that reveals what inspired me to create them. This is what lends a sense of intrigue to my work," Angela notes.



above, *Strut*, acrylic on panel, 12" x 34", 2012

Once satisfied with her composition, Angela reproduces it at full size. She then concerns herself with the preparation of a supported Russian Birch panel, custom-made by a local carpenter who – being a perfectionist himself – understands Angela's insistence on perfectly square corners and an unblemished, utterly flat plane. However, if the painting is particularly large or she wants a surface with a little more "tooth" to aid in blending, Angela will occasionally use fine-textured stretched primed canvas rather than a panel. She applies three coats of thin gesso with a sponge roller to the panel, sanding between coats, to arrive at a velvety smooth painting surface. Next, she transfers the full-scale image onto the board using erasable transfer paper. "After that," she explains, "I choose the colours I intend to use and I

keep a precise record of them. Currently, I'm using Winsor and Newton Artists' Acrylics because they exhibit the least amount of colour shift between the wet and dry states. I prefer a limited colour palette and often mix my own secondary colours." When prepared to begin painting, she blocks in areas of the painting with diluted acrylics until the entire surface is covered. Once certain she's achieving the desired effects, she methodically builds up layers of paint and detail, working from the background to the foreground.

"Whereas photographing a subject that I'm certain will make a great painting is the most pleasant and exciting part of my painting process, the most challenging part is the time-

consuming effort of re-creating the scene with my brushes and paint," Angela confides. "But when I finally realize that I'm finished a painting and it appears to be a success, this test of endurance is quickly forgotten and I'm ready to begin my next creation." Angela's finished paintings, which typically take roughly 3 weeks to complete, are characterized by their crystal clarity, precision and uncluttered composition. At the same time, it is evident that no tiny detail has been overlooked, as her overall goal is to create paintings that capture a viewer's interest from across a room, and proceed to heighten that engagement as the viewer approaches the work.

Angela, herself, finds that colour and lighting first attract her attention to a painting, closely followed by a well thought out composition and



right, *Falco Perigrinus*, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 24", 2007



Trestle, acrylic on canvas, 26" x 45", 2010



Breaking Point, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 72", 2010

proficient workmanship. "Being a Canadian and a Realist painter, I am especially drawn to the works of Alex Colville, Christopher Pratt and Takao Tanabe," Angela explains. "I was fortunate to view exhibitions of Colville's work at the National Gallery in Ottawa and Museum London and I was awestruck at the power of his work, and the premise that composition is paramount to the success of a painting was truly driven home for me."

"I had an equally moving experience at the McMichael Gallery, when Tanabe decided to give an impromptu guided tour of his exhibition. Discussing his transition from Abstraction to Realism, he stated bluntly that while many people interpret greater meaning in his abstract work, they were simply an experiment of design and colour, and certainly no more expressive or substantial than his referential works. As a Realist, I continually struggle with the stigma that Realism is too explicit to be considered 'art', yet there was Takao Tanabe – a highly trained and respected

painter – suggesting that stylistic preference is a personal choice, not to be dictated by the sometimes far-fetched opinions of the arts community," Angela reflects.

Aside from these Realist painters, Angela also has great admiration for Emily Carr and the Group of Seven – particularly Lawren Harris and Franklin Carmichael, whose works so brilliantly evoke a spiritual or transcendent feeling. "I find that I have a strong sense of being Canadian," she notes, "so I identify with their preference for painting Canadian scenes. With all this country's natural beauty and diversity, who could ever desire anything more?" Angela firmly believes that her own artistic development would be severely hampered if she ceased to explore her home country. "Travelling to western Canada for the first time was particularly significant for me in terms of choosing a painting style. I was immediately drawn to the wide-open spaces and the clear, sharp quality of light in the prairies and

mountains. Ever since then, I have made an effort to simplify my paintings to their most essential components and to define my paintings with hard edges and strong lighting," she muses. In fact, the Canadian landscape is such an important theme for Angela that she explored it exclusively for her first solo exhibition, *Coast to Coast*, in 2010.

Even at home, Angela's scientific spirit inspires her to investigate the world around her. "Being able to get outdoors and explore is a very important aspect of my life. I find it hard to imagine not getting up in the morning to take my dogs for a long walk along the forested Thames River Valley in London, Ontario or living somewhere where I couldn't ride my 4-year-old paint mare, Ripley and kayak with my husband," she states. Other times, Angela is excited by the discovery of a fabulous new bakery with the billowing scent of fresh chocolate croissants or stumbling upon a fascinating piece of architecture and history. For instance, after visiting Eldon House (the oldest existing residence

in London, Ontario) Angela decided she would use it as a theme for her upcoming show at The Art Exchange Gallery in November 2012. Upon contacting the Heritage Site Coordinator, Angela was given permission to take photographs of the house and its contents – including rooms that are not open for public viewing.

She was also inspired by reading *The Eldon House Diaries: Five Women's Views of the 19th Century*, which contains extensive excerpts from the personal diaries of women who either lived at Eldon House or were closely-related family members, chronicling the triumphs and tragedies of the Harris family during the Victorian era. "After reading this book and revisiting the estate, my impression of the house and its occupants became intensely personal and I am hoping this impression will come across in the paintings I am currently working on for my November show," Angela discloses. "Hopefully these paintings will not only provide insight into the Victorian lifestyle



above, *Over the Ridge*, acrylic on panel, 12" x 27", 2012



right, *The Outlaws*, acrylic on canvas, 28" x 22", 2009



Two Horses, acrylic on panel, 12" x 16", 2011

of the Harris family but also evoke their very presence." Positive that the show's location will allow viewers to open up and engage intimately with her works, Angela explains, "I'm thrilled to debut my Eldon House series at The Art Exchange because Al Stewart is the most friendly, straightforward and knowledgeable gallery owner I've had the privilege to work with. He and his wife, Karen, make The Art Exchange one of the most comfortable and least pretentious art galleries I've ever been in."

To artists who are just entering the community, Angela advises patience and perseverance. "I almost always get to a half-way point in a painting where I am convinced it isn't working and I feel ready to give up, but usually all it needs is a few more hours of work to turn it around and into the painting I hoped it would be." Here, Angela demonstrates the great wisdom of Edwin H. Land, who wrote: "an essential aspect of creativity is not being afraid to fail. Scientists made a great invention by calling their activities 'hypotheses' and 'experiments' – they made it permissible to falter repeatedly until in the end they get the results they wanted."

Angela admits, "I never cease to be amazed and grateful for the reaction many people have when they see my work for the first time. An unexpected number stay for well over an hour, examining every detail of my paintings, poring over my portfolio and taking the time to discuss my work with me and letting me know their impressions. Their comments have been invaluable and often help guide the future direction of my work." With her modesty, gratitude and insatiable curiosity, Angela reminds all of us – artists and scientists, alike – to be humble and explore and delight in the mysteries of our remarkable planet, molded by invisible fires, kept in motion by unseen forces and lit by inextinguishable lights.

To learn more about Angela Lorenzen and see her work, please email angela@angelalorenzen.ca, telephone (519) 659-8128, or visit www.angelalorenzen.ca. For a gallery representing Angela, contact The Art Exchange at www.theartexchange.ca and get details of her November show.





The Winter Tree, acrylic on canvas, 30" x 40", 2009



Glacier, acrylic on panel, 12" x 24", 2012



Lighthouse, acrylic on canvas, 20" x 60", 2011