

Colourful histories

AAREN MADDEN

Nancy Ruhl's paintings offer vivid homage to domestic architecture while documenting a changing cityscape.



"Land Use Application" by Nancy Ruhl, 46 x 56 inches, acrylic on canvas

An acrylic on board painting by Nancy Ruhl shows a periwinkle blue Queen Anne bungalow. With the house's lacy white trim shining, the whole structure seems to reach upward to the sun's warming rays. The dappled trim and effusive blue are made all the more prominent by contrast to the deep blue-black sky. The small corner lot's bright green grass and fat round shrubs soften the architectural angles and create a balanced scene. It's a quintessential central Victoria home. But look in the lower left. A square white sign buttressed by two-by-fours doesn't display any text, but will still be recognizable to many, and is also the title of the work: "Land Use Application."

Those three words do not bode well for this slice of old Victoria, and Nancy Ruhl paints such scenes for a few reasons. One is out of

appreciation for the beauty and character of such historical gems, offering pause for contemplation of the everyday history that we pass by on the street. Most of all, Ruhl hopes to document, through her own eyes, some of these vernacular treasures before they fall victim to inevitable development and change, often in the form of larger units, condos and gentrification.

It's a pull that Ruhl genuinely struggles with. "My logical brain says 'I get it'," she admits. "I know this has to happen. Urban development is good; urban density is good. A car-free community, I really love the idea of that. But my creative brain is thinking, oh no, don't do that. Maybe my painting is a coping mechanism for how to mesh those two," she muses.

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In fact, Ruhl moved to Victoria from rural Milton, Ontario in 2007 with the goal of living in a walkable neighbourhood. Though she has always loved Lawren Harris' urban Ontario street scenes, her previous subject matter reflected her rural surroundings, and still does when she summers now in Bayfield, Ontario. Her repertoire includes lively rural, marine and forest landscapes, livestock, interiors and figures, including poetic scenes of children immersed in play. But something about Victoria's urban landscape struck a chord: "The architecture is so completely different here. I absolutely love the buildings," she enthuses.

A number of elements attract Ruhl to a certain structure, from implied narrative to aesthetics. "It could be the state of disrepair," she offers. For example, "There's a house on Vancouver Street where a sweet little old lady lives. There's a sign on the stairs that says 'do not use the stairs'

because they are falling apart. I just love that little house."

Or, she says, "The colour could attract me, or just the way the light is on it that day." She often intensifies a house's colour, and her sky colours range from those deep blues to fauvist oranges and yellows. Tonal balance is always a consideration, and she achieves it by studying black and white photographs of works in progress, then altering a painting as necessary.

Though she often paints recognizable landmarks like the Johnson Street Bridge (itself soon to be a memory), or the old custom house on Wharf Street, with its distinctive pink facade and mansard roof, she has a tendency to depict unexpected angles or quiet corners. Her scenes of the intimate corners of Fan Tan Alley, for example, suggest to the viewer that the grand sum of the well known and the


overlooked contribute to the character of this city in equal parts.


Though only relatively recently putting it to canvas, Ruhl comes by this outlook honestly. She was born in Ontario in 1957, and grew up on a farm near Milton. She had the run of 100 acres with her four siblings while her parents tended the farm and brought their ramshackle old farmhouse back to its original glory, replacing tattered linoleum with pine floors and restoring fine woodwork. "By the time we left there, it was beautiful," she recalls admiringly. Her painting of the house's exterior hangs in her living room. Now the house sits amid a park; much of the land has been taken over by housing development. "That's probably another reason why I have mixed feelings about development," she says.



PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL

Nancy Ruhl





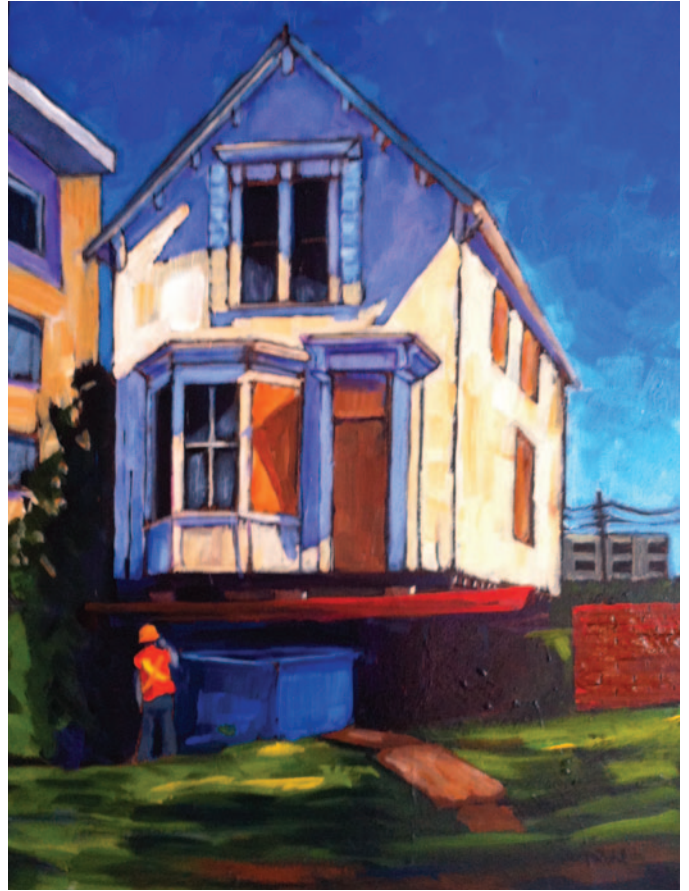


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Paintings by Nancy Ruhl, clockwise from top left:

"Cherry Blossom Resurrection" 24 x 18 inches, acrylic on board

"The 1011" 24 x 18 inches, acrylic on canvas

"Blue Bridge Series #2, Sunset on VIA" 24 x 20 inches, acrylic on board

"Bicycle and Baskets, Fan Tan Alley" 16 x 12 inches, acrylic on board

As an adult, she inherited her parents' interest in interior design and renovation, and renovated and built a house while raising three children. She painted during that time for enjoyment and some profit, and in 1996, when her youngest son was in nursery school, she volunteered to paint a mural on the school wall. In doing so, she realized that art was her true path. In 2003 she enrolled in the illustration and visual communications program at Sheridan College. The intense workload with a young family was simply not feasible; besides, it was painting she preferred, so in the second year she stepped away. The foundation teachings served her well, though. "It was fantastic; it taught me perspective, drawing, anatomy, all kinds of technical skills that I really needed," she says. She's been painting full time ever since.

She has developed a method for pulling out luminous colour in her paintings, whether on smooth board or textured canvas. Often, she will start with a dark or bright wash, vigorously applied—"I scrub the paint in,"—Ruhl says, smiling, "I am not kind to my brushes." She then blocks in the walls and roof of a structure with layered blocks of colour that do not touch, so that the undercoat delineates the structure. Trees can be rendered using the negative space, as is the large leafless one in "The Very Small House." This brings a playful vitality to the whole image.

Her way with Victoria's unsung domestic architecture caught the eye of Michael Warren, owner of Madrona Gallery. What was meant to be a consultation resulted in Warren representing Ruhl. "Often it's not the exceptional, say, Samuel MacLure homes; it's the working class bungalows that help tell the story of the people who built this city," Warren says. "[Ruhl] has this ability to capture these poignant moments of Victoria life through the buildings that she paints."

Her first Madrona exhibition was in 2013—a week after she underwent surgery for breast cancer. Though still on medication, Ruhl is doing well, and has new gratitude for the important things in life: above all, family and human connection, but also painting, which helped sustain her. "I remember thinking in my head, 'I can't die now; I've got five paintings in my head that I really need to do right away'," she shares.

Many had to do with documenting changing streetscapes, and by extension, a changing city. Fittingly, her second solo show, this April at Madrona Gallery, is called "Victoria: Colours in Time." For Ruhl, the title refers to "capturing local moments in time—and sometimes, just in time," she says.

"Victoria: Colours in Time" opens at Madrona Gallery on April 11 and runs until April 27. 250-380-4660, 606 View St, www.madrona-gallery.com. www.nancyruhl.ca.



There is a beautiful rickety old house on the street Aaren Madden walks down to take her kids to school. Lately, she has been walking past it more slowly.

Art and lasting memories...



"Femme" by Lindsay Branson
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