

the studio
by Gerrit Verstraete

***an intimate portrait
of the artist's studio***

the studio

by Gerrit V.L.Verstraete

remembering 1993, ten years ago
when I built my island studio

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the studio

Welcome to my studio.

Bright-red numbers on a clock tell me it is seven in the morning as I step into my studio. It is still dark outside, and as is common on many early mornings on this island, especially in November, the view from my studio is shrouded in fog. A full moon tried in vain to penetrate the misty veil that night, casting pale shadows and a thin blue glow through the trees. Sometimes I am in my studio in the middle of the night, with the view outside as my only consolation during another night of inner turmoil. Life offers many battles, sometimes on the inside and sometimes on the outside. To deal with each one of these struggles, whether large or small, I retreat to my studio, where I can wrestle without the worry of waking my family or being too reserved in my strategy for victory. This morning, however, is not the aftermath of such a night. In fact, I can be accused of being somewhat overly excited this morning. Some may wonder what the excitement is all about, but for me, well, it is a day to begin a new drawing. I spent two days preparing a masonite panel to ready it for silverpoint work. On my knees, surrounded by a plastic drop sheet and newsprint, I messed around with gesso, flat white primer, and marbledust, creating a white ground for the drawing. While the surface was still wet, I splattered guache, gold dust, and silver enamel on the white ground. With tracing paper and a lucite roller the fun began as I rolled all sorts of random effects into the wet ground. After the panel had thoroughly dried, a quick sanding smoothed the surface enough to begin drawing. That was two days ago. While preparing the masonite panel my thoughts wandered to subject matter. I decided on a drawing of Krista. I have many sketches and reference photographs of her. The sketches and photographs have been a source of many finished studio drawings that span some six years. It was Krista who first introduced me to a model's view of the *sacredness* of modeling. One day, after a long modeling session, she commented on the artist-model relationship and called it special.

I asked her to explain.

"When you create drawings using me as a model," she said, "I feel the moment is special. It is sacred because a moment of reality is captured and frozen in time. It is also an honour to be chosen by an artist for such moments of reality, moments that find expression in art."

She also said, that this *sacredness* is enhanced when the artist-model relationship is one of trust and integrity. We both lament Hollywood's relentless misrepresentation of artists and their models. Even the blockbuster movie, *Titanic*, was a dismal failure in presenting the artist in a true light. No sooner had Leonardo DiCaprio, the actor, settled down to draw his model, he gave in to other passions, passions that boosted the movie's ratings to ensure box-office success. He put down his pencil and sketchpad and seduced the young woman. Rubbish. That was neither a sacred moment nor was it art. We both agreed *Titanic* wasn't the only movie to taint what could have been an artist's sacred moment.

Krista has moved to Nova Scotia to attend the Nova Scotia Institute of Art. She has always wanted to design jewelry as an extension of three-dimensional artwork. The last time she wrote me, she had found some work as a model to begin paying for her studies and life in Halifax. "But," she said, "I hold you up as an example of highest quality in the way you draw and the integrity of your creative journey. You are a joy to work with." I am flattered. Good models are hard to find. Modeling is not a mere

exercise in sitting still or standing nude before a bunch of artists or in front of the artist in his or her private studio. I have seen excellent models and really bad ones, and the difference was definitely not looks. The best models are the ones who understand the artist, who willingly work with the artist to create artistic poses, and who can sit still for great lengths of time. Even though I offer models a break every twenty minutes or so, the good ones can sit still for at least an hour and would rather not break their concentration. Another quality of models is their aesthetic beauty as defined by what I call *topograpgy*. A model's topography is the variety and quality of muscle shapes, the contours of figurative line and an overall, well-defined physical structure. Sometimes that structure is young, sometimes old. Beautiful figures are not defined by natural "endowments," a lesson I learned long ago when studying with my favourite teachers back at art college in the nineteen sixties. John Alfsen would chastise us when we seemed too preoccupied with other than topographic images. He once poked a student in the side and condemned the beginner's drawing as simply "local colour." He pointed to the student's feeble attempt to draw endowments, stating local colour is not what makes a good drawing. Good drawings begin on the inside of the model. I will never forget John Alfsen's comments.

Beauty as applied to figurative drawing, is the interpretation of what I see and what I know to be below the surface of the model, which in turn inspires me to express the human figure in line and mass, especially when I draw during a group session of life drawing, such as Monday evenings with the Drawing Society of Canada in a large room at the back of the old Occidental Hotel and Oxy Pub in Nanaimo, British Columbia. The human form is the toughest thing to draw. After an hour or so of complete immersion in my drawing, I am lost in another world, a world of classical disciplines and tremendous satisfaction as the drawing takes shape on my paper. Models as people often are less important than models as topographic wonders. Most of the models I draw are distant from me personally. They remain topographic wonders. That is not to say the human form is impersonal and void of soul and spirit. It is only in my studio where I have time to explore the soul and spirit of my models. Most drawings, however, are studies of human anatomy. At least, that's the way I draw. Only when a particular pose of a particular model inspires me to create a finished drawing in the studio, do I take the time to draw not only what I know and see, but what I do not know and cannot see - the human spirit. Some models have become friends. When they inspire me to draw, each drawing becomes special as anatomical wonder is blended with personality. Krista is such a model. There are others as well.

My thoughts this misty and dark morning, however, are far from Krista, Michael, Noel, Erin, and the *Titanic*, even though the next drawing *taxiing on the runway*, will be a drawing of Krista. It's an aspect of the creative process in me I am very familiar with. I discovered it while managing the advertising agency I owned years ago. The agency had a portfolio of clients that numbered about one hundred with small budgets and large budgets. As creative director, I usually had anywhere from ten to twenty projects on the go. As I concentrated on the creative solutions required for one, I discovered that somewhere in the back of my mind was a capability to think about other projects as well. While producing a television commercial I could, with little effort, think about the design of a magazine ad for another client.

Now, as days and years in my studio grow into an ever increasing body of work, I discover again and again, that while working on one drawing, my mind is free to roam to

other ideas for other drawings, without affecting the concentration and creativity of the drawing or painting in progress. I liken the process to a number of airplanes preparing for takeoff as they taxi on the runway. My present drawing has been cleared for takeoff and is now in full flight, yet at any time, I can look back down the runway to see what idea is brewing in the recesses of my mind. Often when one drawing nears completion, the next one is ready to fly and becomes a real encouragement especially when the one nearing completion has sometimes taken as much time as eighty to one-hundred hours from start to finish. These are the meticulous and carefully crafted studio drawings, quite unlike the spontaneous Monday night drawings that take much less time to do. In my studio, however, time, creativity, and motivation, are carefully balanced over time to allow clearing for takeoff for each drawing. I have been known to jump ahead in the lineup of my thoughts. A drawing, brewing somewhere back five or six places, may suddenly jump the line and take off. No one seems to mind.

Today I begin a new drawing in silverpoint, and the particular pose of Krista I have chosen, will no doubt remain an inspiration for the entire process. Silverpoint is an exacting medium that dates back to the fifteenth century, with its predecessor, metalpoint, especially *lead*, dating back even further. I love silverpoint's meticulous challenge as I carefully build my lines and tones on a mixed-media surface. Like exposed photographic paper in a developer's bath, a gentle image begins to appear on my paper as silverpoint gradually darkens to no more than a middle-grey. In time, silverpoint drawings "mature" to take on a tarnished look of brown and black as a result of oxidation. But, I am ahead of myself.

It was ten years ago when I built my first island studio, but it was not the first studio.

I began in my first studio when the children were very young. Jeff and Wendy were still toddlers. Alice and I were blessed with four more children, six in total, and I have had something of a studio through all of them. We had bought a semi-detached home on Playford Avenue in Mississauga and my designated creative space was a corner of an unfinished basement. It was a reasonable space but very confining as the ceiling was barely eight feet high. When we moved to Pine Avenue in the Port Credit area of Mississauga, I occupied a guest room facing the backyard. It was a small studio but it had a view. From my window the sky was filled with tall trees, green grass, and a steep embankment beyond which stood an oil refinery. For a season I did enjoy a downtown Toronto studio, which in fact was the back portion of a large space I had rented for the commercial design company I began after I graduated from art college. The space was at 74 York Street, four floors above *The Nag's Head Pub*. That was the late sixties, a time before the children were born. When the studio grew into an advertising agency, I gave up my drawing and painting space on York Street and concentrated all my creative efforts at a new business address and a large executive office complete with a massive drafting table. Within a few years, the thriving ad agency moved quickly from townhouse to commercial buildings, as we bought our "way up" in the Toronto real estate market. Drawing and painting were moved to a home-studio again, where I managed to find some spare time, usually on weekends only, to work on art. I used to dream of owning a large mobile studio so I could drive to wherever nature inspired me. My life drawing and figurative work were limited to the time I spent at art college, drawing in their continuing education program. That amounted to one night a week, which I managed to do for many years after I graduated. The mobile studio never was.

My basement-spare-bedroom studio was used for landscapes and seascapes in oils, acrylics and watercolours. I often wondered what it would have been like to have had a studio like Tom Thomson's studio, once a frontier northern Ontario hideaway and now a small wooden shack standing carefully preserved on the grounds of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg. When I am not in my studio I am sketching my *coffeeshop people* at Tim Hortons in Nanaimo and elsewhere on Vancouver Island. When weather permits I travel to favourite locations to spend time *en plein air*, drawing in the forest or by a waterfall. I think of Emily Carr's mobile studio, and the times she took it deep into the forest along with her pets, to spend solitary time painting and sketching.

Not until the whole family moved to Gabriola Island, however, did I get my first "real" studio. By "real" I mean a place designed and built especially for art, and not something leftover after other family priorities had laid claim to any spare space.

My present island studio is a spacious room measuring some twenty-five by thirty feet with a large closet for supplies, files and other stuff, as well as a small loft for those things I may never need again but hate to toss out. Light is cast abundantly throughout the studio as the sun pours through two skylites in a cathedral ceiling. Two large windows face east, a large window faces west, and sliding glass doors face north. I have lots of light including the much-coveted artist's light from a northern exposure. On certain summer days it is so bright in my studio, I cannot draw. During the fall and winter, darkness wraps my studio in silence as early as four in the afternoon. Few realize we live halfway between the 49th and 50th parallel, the equivalent of Gander, Newfoundland, and as far away as Scotland. The studio is attached to our family home which I built at the same time ten years ago in 1993.

I love my studio.

In one corner stands my drawing easel and the view past my drawing board is our front yard and a long driveway that slopes briskly down towards the road some eighty feet away. Our house is built on a half-acre lot and over the edge of a large boulder about three-quarters of the way into the lot. That rock is big enough to warrant a two-storey house and a generous crawlspace that looks more like a basement. My studio is built on the uppermost portion of that giant rock. Except for some patches of blue sky, wherever I look I see trees, tall trees, towering trees, so tall they scare me when Pacific storms pass over the island. Sometimes during those storms I hear a big *thud*. Another tree has fallen, once on my old car but never on our house or on my studio. Last summer our neighbour cleared most of the trees that edged our property and at least from that corner, the threat of falling trees no longer plagues me. When it rains it rains hard and long. Water falls straight from temperate skies and the sound on my steel-roofed studio is a steady drum of staccato sound that beats alternately between downright cozy and somewhat frightening.

In the other corner stand all my painting supplies. A blind wall is lined with bookshelves, storage units for paper and drawings, a round oak table with four chairs and my trusted stereo. Right beside the door to my studio stands a wooden drafting table that serves as a lightbox as well. It's a good place to spend a day creating art. With just steps from the family kitchen, I am never far from cookies, coffee, and lunch. Nor am I far from my wife Alice, whose companionship in marriage I have enjoyed for over thirty-five years, since 1967, the year we said "I do."

When time came to expand and make more room in the studio, I cleared out all remnants of office and computer stuff. These now stand in a spare bedroom turned into a small office. That was just a month or so before the year 2002 sped to a close.

At last, a space all my own.

Finally, thirty-two years after our first child Jeff was born, and my first basement studio, plus five more children, through many leftover spaces in a number of houses as we moved to bigger homes, with every bit of space first in line for much-needed family growth, I am alone in my island studio. There is no longer any need for anyone to interrupt me to use the computer, check emails, or look through files. All that is left now of sufficient reasons for anyone to enter my studio is only to borrow masking tape, scissors, or to get some paper. But, I am working on that too. I am not a recluse, however. Of course I love my family. It's not that I mind the interruptions either. Our whole journey together as a large family has been a very interactive journey with the only "private" space, our personal bedrooms. Even those at times became a gathering place. It's just that when I begin a new drawing I need privacy and solitude. It is a very sacred moment to begin a new work of art. It is also a very emotional moment as I take that first step in *"separating dark from light"* with the first strokes of a pencil, a silverpoint, or brush, to mark my commitment to the work and the creative process. It takes me quite some time and emotional effort to begin a new work. Sometimes it takes days as I fidget around in the studio, doing everything I can to avoid beginning a new drawing. I'll doodle, drink too much coffee, wander too many times into the kitchen to see what cookies there are, write some more in my journals, listen to music, and stare at that big white piece of paper I have mounted on my drawing board. It taunts me.

"Come and draw on me, if you dare," the paper whispers and sometimes shouts.

I turn away to avoid the paper's daring glare.

Finally, in a moment of determined courage, I find the strength to begin, and suddenly the first lines on paper open the floodgates to hours of endless drawing. My friend and long-distance mentor, John Gould, calls the moment "real time." I love to draw in real time.

Other times I am so deeply involved in my drawing, interruptions actually startle me and cause me to lose concentration. There are also times when the subjects of my drawings, specifically nudes, are such that viewing is for mature audiences only, even though, my children have never been ashamed of my journey as an artist, nor have they been "sheltered" from my figurative work. I am no longer a landscape or seascape artist, nor do I draw and paint wildlife and portraits. I am a classically trained artist with a passion for drawing, especially figurative drawing, a time-honoured tradition that dates back centuries. My journey in painting has evolved along abstract and minimalist lines. However, with a certain amount of persuasion, I am known to have painted a large canvas with waves crashing into a lighthouse, and another canvas with a towering wave. Both paintings are oils, one a wedding gift to my daughter Angela and her husband Jeff, the other a wedding gift to my daughter Karen and her husband Doug. I have also been commissioned to draw dogs. Michael Brown and Camila Midence are American friends who insist I create large black-and-white drawings of their "family," who are a breed of magnificent labs. Carlos was the godfather of them all. He was a yellow lab. His drawing hangs in their diningroom. Sophia, his partner, will soon grace a wall as well. That leaves three of their offspring and any number of adopted dogs.

This morning I have once again turned on the studio lights, placed my second cup of coffee carefully beside my drawing easel, and turned on a favourite CD. Because my studio is attached to the house only on the north side, the side of our front hallway and kitchen, I can turn up the volume of my stereo without disturbing the rest of the family. This morning's choice is classical music.

As soon as my silver stylus hits the mixed-media surface of my drawing, my thoughts take flight as well, beyond thoughts of other studios I have known along the way, to deeper thoughts of art, its divine purpose, and why I love this special place called *the studio*.

Silverpoint is an exacting medium, yet when mastered it brings tremendous satisfaction to know I have touched base with a drawing technique that dates back to the fifteenth century. It takes a couple of days to prepare any number of pieces of paper with a ground I mix myself. Then after the paper has dried I press the sheets to make them flat for drawing. A bit of sanding and burnishing ensure a smooth surface. I usually plan my silverpoint drawings from subject material that is carefully selected from my sketch files and photographs I have taken. After I have put a quick outline of the drawing on paper, I begin the gentle task of layering careful tones in silverpoint and building the strength of lines one stroke at a time. When I can go no further with silverpoint, which usually means a middle-grey, I often choose to "kick up" the lines and tones with a bit of graphite. This pose of Krista is a standing back view with a large, patterned-cloth draped and gathered over her waist. The actual image is nine by seventeen inches, and simply called "*Krista*." I wonder how she is doing as the first winter snows have begun to fall in Halifax. It can get pretty nasty "out east," as those Atlantic "Nor-Easterns" come roaring through with sleet, blinding snow, and driving wind. Hope she stays bundled up as she experiences the drastic change from the temperate climate she grew up in.

My thoughts drift to another time when someone else inspired a series of drawings.

I began this special series of drawings in late March of 2001. The drawings marked the first time I ventured deep into my own soul to express emotions associated with seeing a friend depart for Europe. Not that I had never drawn emotionally before. Many drawings were inspired by people, as were for example, "*the lady in blue*" drawings of 1999. But Carla was more than an inspiration. Not only had she become a friend of ours, my wife and I counseled her for six months as she "rose from the ashes" of a life in which she lost nearly everything, including many of her possessions such as a waterfront home and cherished belongings that spoke of dreams and hopes of a promising future, and a husband who, after only a few years of their young marriage, deserted her for another woman. Carla came into our lives as "a bird with broken wings," but she rose again healed, strong in her faith, and determined to get up and start again. My creative inspiration first took flight as a poem titled, "*a bird with broken wings*." A month later I felt inspired to express the emotions and thoughts of that poem in a series of drawings. In total some ten large drawings were completed, some in chalk, some in colour pencil, and one large spontaneous drawing in silverpoint, titled "*I watched her fly away*."

Three years later, in May of 2004, I was honoured to perform the marriage of Carla to her newfound love David, aka Yukon. It was a very special moment. In case you wondered, I am also an ordained pastor in our community and licensed by the province

of British Columbia to perform marriages. Or, as one friend and fellow artist once quipped, “a pastor who draws naked people in the basement of a pub.”

Not long after the Carla drawings, I experienced a similar outpouring of creativity because of someone else who came into my life and inevitably into the studio. As my thoughts drift to memories of a flower called the *Western Trillium*, I remembered sharing those thoughts with my friend and painter, Helen Lucas. I wanted to encourage her in her own creative journey, so I thought the story of the *Western Trillium* would inspire her.

"Dear Helen," I wrote.

"You might want to get yourself a coffee or tea as this 'epistle' will take some time to read." And so I began my story. To this day it remains a wonderfully encouraging story that touches the very heart of the artist in me, and is perhaps even a glimpse of what art's pure form looks like, a form I call "art of the spirit." Because the story is very personal and involves a close friend, confidentiality does not permit me to share all details, nor do I need to.

Again, the events surrounding this creative story came as a result of my wife Alice and my position of pastoral leadership on Gabriola Island. Her name is Alisha, a young single mother, who with her daughter Ciaran came into our lives in a special way. Alisha was a deeply hurt woman, with pain going back to her childhood years. When we got to know her and Ciaran, she experienced a wonderful awakening. Both Alice and I walked and counseled her through much of the pain of her past and present, and nurtured her to spiritual and emotional health. Alisha became like a daughter as well as a priceless friend. Alice and I became godparents and guardians of her daughter Ciaran. Alisha's biggest test of faith came in January 2001, when her mother, at the young age of only forty-eight, passed away and in May 2003, when her father passed away. Through it all we saw in Alisha a miracle of resolve to put her trust and faith in God.

It was also a time I had run into a dry spell in my work. Drawings seemed to come with difficulty. One day, my wife and I went for a walk through Cathedral Forest, one of my favourite places of retreat. While in the forest, I came across the *Western Trillium*, a feisty early spring flower that rises singularly from the forest floor. Somehow that flower spoke to my heart. Pointing at the flower, I shared with Alice that it took courage for the single-stemmed *Western Trillium* to reach for the top in that massive forest surrounded by trees hundreds of years old. I thought of Alisha and how she had the courage to press ahead with life, despite pain and adversity. It berthed a poem called "*The Western Trillium*." When I finished writing the poem, I sensed the dry time was over. In my spirit rose a myriad of ideas and creative thoughts.

To start the river flowing I did a small drawing of the trillium and along with a copy of the poem, gave both to Alisha. The inspiration continued for many more drawings.

As I watch the "*Krista*" drawing develop slowly before my eyes, I wondered about art's purest form. Is not this the purest form of art, to touch the spirit of men and women and encourage them to press on? Do I in fact get a glimpse of real "art of the spirit" when I experience how my work as an artist touches the lives of people right where they are? Whether it is the vocabulary of aesthetics, the disciplines of line, form, mass and colour, or the liberated expression of heart and soul in any medium, it all boils down to touching someone when he or she hurts or when he or she celebrates life with joy and passion. Sometimes it takes a flower to remind me of the beauty of people and

how much I need them and we need each other. People often remain a greater joy than my artwork. So my escape from this often frightening and mad world is an escape into beauty, the beauty of people, be it a portrait, a coffeeshop person, a figure study, a themed drawing, and even an abstract painting. All because it is usually these precious people who are the reason I stay inspired and motivated to carry on myself. They are family and the extended family of friends who I love so much.

Leaving my thoughts of the *Western Trillium*, I am jarred back into the present. Something's wrong with my drawing. I am not satisfied with the way a particular area of the drawing is developing. I am probably drifting too far in my thoughts and not paying enough attention to my work, but such is the liberty of working in the studio. I cannot erase silverpoint, one of the reasons the medium is so exacting. I have no choice but to carefully apply new ground over the mistake and wait patiently for the mixture of gesso and marble dust to dry. It's only a very small area at the bottom of the drawing, so drying time should be fifteen minutes or so. I think I'll take a break and have a deliciously flavoured coffee. Of course, that means walking past the cookie tin. Oh the perils of an artist's journey in the studio.

A half hour later I sand the new patch of white ground and continue drawing. Soon the drawing develops in a seamless fashion with no hint of any mistake.

It was Helen Lucas who first called my studio a chapel. It is an interesting description of my studio yet an apt one, considering I spend most of my days there, and each day I am very aware of my spiritual as well as creative journey as an artist. In fact, I have learned the dividing line between art and spirituality is a very faint one. Art is an expression of my spirituality and spirituality is a river of life for my art. What better place than in the studio to draw and paint as well as meditate on the issues of life. For those reasons, the studio is a chapel, a sanctuary, and a place to which I can retreat should the pressures of life begin to overwhelm me.

Such is the case this morning, and it is only seven o'clock.

I cannot escape the relentless pressure of those who resign artistic success to sales and a pedigree of "who is who" of galleries who may or may not show my work. I cannot begin to number all the times I have been told to draw "what sells," or what the market is buying. Maybe after ten juried shows I can sport some ambiguous initials behind my name to say I have arrived. When I discussed this with a friend, who also has walked this road through art, we both came to the same conclusion. We have arrived. At least, suffice it to say, we are qualified to call ourselves artists. She too is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art & Design, and the AOCA (Associate of the Ontario College of Art & Design) we carry behind our names is sufficient. I only took on the challenge of a BFA, Bachelor of Fine Art degree, to further qualify to teach drawing in those places where academic degrees are required. I haven't found a suitable place yet to pursue a masters degree to qualify me to teach at university and college levels.

A knock on my studio door interrupts my thoughts. It is Ciaran, my godchild.

It is Tuesday and she has come to spend the afternoon with me as she does every Tuesday, while Alisha, her mom, takes care of an after-school program at the island's *Gathering Place* for youth. It's just around the corner of my studio. Ciaran has taped a sign to my studio door which already sports my own sign that says, "private studio." It serves as a constant reminder to my children that this is dad's space and not an alternative playroom. In her handwriting, seven-year old Ciaran, wrote the words, "my studeoo too," and taped the piece of paper just below my sign. Sometimes we get on the

floor of the studio and make colour pencil or colour marker drawings. Other times we go down to the familyroom to play with toys. It's a welcome break from the disciplines of studio work. It may appear I have abandoned my own children to favour and spend time with Ciaran, but that is not so. When all our children were little, I spent countless hours drawing pictures with them and playing the games we loved so much. It's just that they're all grown up now and I miss the "little ones." Suzanne, now eighteen, once asked if she could put a drawing on the refrigerator door as well, beside the drawing from Ciaran. Of course she could. Ciaran reawakens, as hopefully will my grandchildren, the joy of being with children and see an unbridled creativity I long to stay in touch with. When our first grandchild, Haley, was born to our daughter Angela and her husband Jeff, I found myself on the studio floor smearing paint around large sheets of paper as we fingerpainted together, a two-and-a-half year old Haley and a fifty-eight year old *opa*. It's a thrill to stay in touch with a child's creativity.

That is not to say the disciplines of studio work are a chore. Not in the least. If it weren't for those disciplines, I wouldn't be able to draw the things I want to draw. It's no secret that creativity is ninety-five percent hard work and five percent inspiration. Anyone who pretends it is otherwise is deceived. I love the discipline of studio work. Whether they are endless hours and full days in the studio, the thrill of starting a new work, the satisfaction of completing a drawing or painting, or simply the comfort that perseverance and patience *do* pay, these studio disciplines are the foundation stones of all creativity. Those who ignore them build on sand. Those who cherish and nourish them build on rock. Tomorrow I will continue my silverpoint drawing, but for the moment it is play time. Sometimes my wife Alice warns me not to get too rambunctious, after all, she says, "you're not twenty anymore." So, we curl up on the sofa and watch some afternoon cartoons.

The thing I like most about my studio is its solitude. An artist needs solitude to work out the creative process, a process that so often runs miles ahead of the actual painting on canvas or drawing on paper. Solitude is the fertile ground in which discipline grows. Solitude is a good thing. There will be plenty of time later for social interaction, family time, and recreation, but while in the studio, the word is *solitude*. Sometimes it is necessary to let others know solitude means no interruption, not even the phone. The reason I like solitude so much is because during my time alone I can work on developing my disciplinary skills and as a result reap a rich reward of very productive creativity.

A budding artist once asked me, "how do you manage to get so many drawings completed in a matter of months?"

I replied by asking him a question.

"How much time do you spend in your studio?"

"Well," he said, "I walk my dogs in the morning, then I have a shower and breakfast, and after some phonecalls to friends, I get into the studio by noon. I work till afternoon tea and then get ready for supper and evening dance classes."

"There's your answer," I said.

I am in my studio by the latest at eight in the morning and that is after I have spent time in personal devotions and answering emails. I don't look at my computer again until the following morning, unless I have set aside a day to work on my essays and personal journals. I work in the studio until late afternoon and then I quit. Evenings are for relaxation, not work. My studio remains dark in the evenings. When other duties

and responsibilities require me to stop working in the studio, I plan for those duties and responsibilities in carefully measured times. These responsibilities include the joyfull commitment to the island's children as I teach drawing to homeschooler groups and students at the Gabriola Elementary School. Every second Friday I write a newspaper column and prepare a cartoon for the same newspaper. The rest of the day I look after administrative matters for the *Drawing Society of Canada*, which I founded in 1998. Every Wednesday morning I mentor a student. I don't have hobbies or "other interests," except for long distance driving. Most of my time is studio time. Five of our six children have moved out to get on with their adult lives, so there is plenty of time available to work in the studio. But most of all, I enjoy my studio time, where solitude, inspiration, perspiration, and reflection, add up to daily renewal.

One regret, however, is that I am limited in the size of drawings I create. Not because I cannot draw large, but because I cannot see large. I need reading glasses for most of my up-close drawings. I can still draw vigorously from life using quick arms-length gestures and strokes to create quality sketches, but not sustained drawings. These are the drawings that take anywhere from ten to a hundred hours to complete. These are the academy drawings, the Renaissance drawings, and the mixed-media works. To satisfy a need to work large, I shift gears and create abstract and expressionist paintings on large canvasses. My favourite size of canvas is four foot square. The antithesis to meticulous drawing, as spontaneous and free as the actual drawings may be, is painting. I readily switch between the two, even though most of the time drawing wins the greatest prize of designated hours.

Tuesday is gone and the prospect of an early start in the studio the following morning excites me as my silverpoint drawing awaits my touch.

As morning dawns in another grey wash, my drawing beckons to work in great detail on the Krista study. It is turning into a gentle but precise silverpoint work. Some would argue as to the reason I would choose such a demanding medium of a tradition that appears far removed from our contemporary, post-modern present. But therein lies the mystery of silverpoint. Silverpoint does not allow for speculation and fantasy about competing in the ever-increasing glut of reproduction art. Silverpoint is not reproducible, so each work, each drawing, is an original work of art that belongs to the very hours in which it was created, making the individual work very contemporary. Reproduction silverpoint is an oxymoron. It is not possible. The beauty of silverpoint lies in its unique effect on paper. It is silver on ground on paper. To reproduce it tends to reduce the silver drawing to a graphite look-alike, as both silver and graphite look similar to the untrained eye. Unfortunately, every image of a silverpoint drawing that appears in my collection of art books, looks like a graphite drawing. However, the discerning viewer, who comes upon an original silverpoint work in a gallery or in my studio, quickly notices the mysterious silvery sheen of a silverpoint work, a sheen that cannot be reproduced with even the finest inks and best presses, including digital technology. This inability to reproduce silverpoint eventually led to the craft's drift into obscurity with the advent of reproduction technology. By the seventeenth century, when artists had discovered they could transpose the art of silverpoint or metalpoint drawing to metal and stone plates, engravings and etchings were born, and silverpoint became out-of-fashion as reproduction art flourished. Rembrandt, a painting and drawing master who became famous for all his etchings and engravings, was known to have created only one silverpoint work. It wasn't until the nineteenth century, when a revival

of silverpoint began in the United States. That revival never spread to Canada and silverpoint is virtually non-existent in the collections of drawings in Canadian galleries and museums. At the risk of sounding somewhat exclusive, I know of only one artist in Canada, other than myself, who draws in silverpoint. He is John Gould who first introduced me to the medium in the late nineteen-eighties. Since then, I have discovered only one other Canadian artist who, by his own confession, "dabbles" in some silverpoint work.

My drawing looks beautiful.

Slowly it begins to emerge from the ground-coated, masonite panel, as delicate tone is laid upon delicate tone, with an occasional hint of a sparingly graphite line. Krista is beginning to look like a beautiful work of art.

Even conventional beauty seems to be out-of-fashion in the world of high art, but it thrives in the world of decorator arts, the landscapes, fantasy works, and wildlife creations. Needless to say, everyone is free to pursue personal tastes be they high art or decorator art. I do not create works of art that conform to contemporary colour schemes in fashions, home decor, and other trends. My studio is a place where I give voice in art to the feelings and spirit that reside within me. I do have something to say, yet I am equally aware of the limits of my artistic abilities. But, when I choose to "push the envelope" and dare tread far beyond convention, even in silverpoint, wonderful things happen. Silverpoint ground has been resigned to traditional coatings of calcified bones and other calcium carbonate compounds suspended in a diluted mixture of rabbitskin glue. However, when I push beyond conventions, I discovered new grounds in mixtures of plaster of Paris, marbledust, guache, watercolour, gold dust, silver enamel, and even colour pencil stick washed with solvent. The end-result remains a diverse experience of a number of new grounds that takes me to soaring heights of satisfaction. Who says my work is traditional? Who implies my work is void of modern experience and contemporary expression? Some have and they are wrong.

But rest assured, I will not mount a protest march on the steps of the Vancouver Art Gallery to defend my creativity and lay contemporary and modern claims to an ancient artform.

I remind myself not to spend much time arguing with critics. Instead, and despite temptations to do otherwise, I will let my drawings do the talking for me. Not only do I feel very contemporary and modern in my silverpoint work, the feelings exist in all my other drawings and paintings as well, whether they drift towards realism or venture far into the realm of abstract expressionism, or when I stretch my wings to paint the *conchetto* works.

It is just about eleven o'clock and time for a flavoured coffee. Perhaps there's a cookie left in the jar, unless of course Matthew has beaten me to the last morsel leaving me only crumbs. My current drawing of Krista comes in a long lineup of silverpoint drawings, as I prepare for a one-month solo showing of my work in Vancouver, during February of 2003. I began the new silverpoint drawings in August, and now it is November. Even though I have quite a few earlier silverpoint works, I want this show to be fresh and recent. If Krista is the last drawing in this series, I can expect thoughts of new works to begin to thrive any day now. Something inside me says it's time to stretch my wings and do some spontaneous drawings in chalk just to loosen up the muscles and joints, and lay down my reading glasses for a spell. Now that the northwest corner of my studio has been cleared and prepared for painting, perhaps I will switch to oils and

acrylics and leave drawing altogether, at least for a season. Painting is not a different artform for me. Painting is an extension of my drawing.

Yet another reason the studio is such a special place for me is the opportunity it gives me to give something back to this great country I call home. I have been privileged to spend time in such far-away places as Africa, Mexico, Israel, Europe, the United States, and our Canadian Arctic. Every time I return from my travels the moment of touchdown is an emotional one. I am reminded of the time I stood on the deck of a converted troop and supply ship as it slowly steamed into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. In the distance I could see the majestic headlands of what was to be my new homeland, Canada. The year was 1958, and I was thirteen years old. Canada remains a vast and awesome country that has so much to share with those who call her home. Somehow, I feel honoured and moved to leave something for Canadians today and for future generations, as well as leave a legacy for my children and grandchildren.

Art is much more than just a mirror of nature. Art is a voice. Specifically, art is a voice *of* the artist and not just a voice *for* a cause. Art as a voice *for* a cause is simply advertising. Art as a voice *of* the artist is the conscience of society. I believe the distinction between *of* and *for* is an important one. I can think of one area where the distinction is very necessary and that is in what we know as religious or iconographic art when compared to pure expressionist art. I have seen the mistake made that art is yet another tool for proclaiming the faith of the artist, or his or her religious affiliation. As a result, art is reduced to mere icons that in some graphic or symbolic way represent illustrations of the tenets of faith and doctrines of belief that occupy the artist in his or her spiritual journey. Art becomes an advertisement *for* a religious cause or a specific church denomination. Little is known of the artist.

My thoughts in the studio, whether I draw or paint, are a blend of an extreme and not-so-extreme understanding that shapes my daily worldview. Most of the time my thoughts are good but sometimes they are bad, especially when people have offended me or simply "rubbed me the wrong way." Usually, any clash of wills and ways revolves around issues of personal faith. However, what I do believe has been and is constantly "tried in the furnace of the earth," to become solid foundations of truth. I know of what I speak and believe. As a result, my art becomes an expression of how the issues of faith and life shape me as I live and play in a community of people, and to a larger extent how I live and play in the family of man. It is not enough to mirror a majestic, snow-capped mountain only to freeze the image in time. What does the mountain do *to me* and how does it shape my actions and reactions to the infinitely varied courses of life? My passion is the human figure, not only because it poses the greatest challenge in drawing and painting from life, but also because inherent in the human form are all aesthetic and artistic *voices* with which to speak of my personal journey. My journey is a never-ending search for what Augustine called the "city of God," that eternal place called home forever. Yet, my journey remains a never-ending transformation as this city finds an eternal home in me, in the human spirit, as I seek first the *Kingdom of God*. Somehow, my art must become a voice, not for doctrine and dogma, but for the effect that search and that journey have on my day-to-day life in the company of family and friends, or in times of solitude in my studio. Only then will I create a valuable contribution to Canada and those who call her home. And should by the grace of God, my artistic voice be heard and seen beyond these borders, then I am the more pleased. For those reasons and more, my studio remains a special place not only to consider the possibilities of my

creative journey, but to consider as well the promises of a spiritual journey. For reasons I cannot really explain, art has given me a spiritual consciousness that causes me to think deeper and deeper about the issues of life and eternity.

Not all thoughts in the studio are bright and bubbly. Many are serious thoughts. Sometimes futility and despair crowd my thinking especially as a result of injustice. I feel surrounded by injustice. Political expediency, capitalist profit, media exploitation, bureaucratic waste, and unqualified commentary, make me angry. I see injustice towards the real poor, towards women, the abandoned single mothers, and towards children. Sex and drugs still sell and authorities pretend powerlessness when in fact they know it's too profitable a boon to give up. Art suffers too. True recognition is hard to come by in Canada at least from the art "establishment." A renowned scholar said, "nearly all institutions, unfortunately, work with bureaucratically conceived and enumerated criteria of worth and excellence which have nothing to do with intrinsic value." It seems that with some national institutions, for an artist to become a success he or she must first be a success. Funds are rare and granted along political not artistic lines. Gabriola Island is far removed from the Toronto and Montreal scenes. The internet is a weak and sporadic link to collectors of fine art but a goldmine for digital reproductions of genre. The millennium grants of 2000 read like a political riding map of the Liberal government's election strategies. I am comforted that some of Canada's greatest artists are my peers who have accepted me as one of their own, something I did not ask for, but they offered generously nevertheless. I am humbled. There also appears to be little comradery in the arena of figurative art, especially figurative drawing in the classical tradition. Drawing remains painting's poorer sibling. Post modernism, minimalism, destructivism, "shock art," and publicity stunts, favour the galleries and an unsuspecting public.

There is also a dark side in the community where I live. Amidst the claims of tranquility, and abundant creativity in our "isle of the arts," linger deep-seated suspicions of every big corporation, and government decision. Conspiracy theories abound, and some even believe religious conviction is a social disease, while they line up at food banks to collect groceries generously donated by the island's churches.

Pardon me, but my rejection is showing.

I have to watch myself because sometimes I get so angry I cannot draw and the protective shield around my quiet studio sanctuary is punctured. Damage control is paramount. It sometimes takes a few days or a week to heal. Forgiveness can be tough sledding.

I come back to the unique position of my studio as a creative workplace, a peaceful sanctuary, a chapel of celebration, and an island of retreat. Is it any wonder that when people suggest I "take a break," I ask them, "from what?" Who would want to leave such a special place? When other calendar events demand time and attention, I always look forward to my return to the studio. Even long distance driving is accentuated by the knowledge the drive will end right where it started - in the studio. Now, for those who would suggest I have become a recluse, I remind them that the greatest priority of life on this planet is my wife, my children, my grandchildren and a growing number of very special people who are my friends. The studio will never be an excuse to remove myself from the love of people I have come to cherish so much. After all, art without love is nothing but a clanging gong, of which there are too many in our

post-modern era. To create art in a vacuum of love-less feelings is a waste of time. Such art turns the studio into a prison and for some even a morgue.

That is why the door to my studio is always open. Rarely do I lock it and when I do, it is only for an hour or so when I need to be assured of an uninterrupted time, especially when I begin a new project.

I have completed the Krista drawing and for a short while I will leave the drawing on my easel. It gives me some time to walk away from the concentration it took to create the drawing and hopefully catch any bits and pieces I need to change before putting the work in my collection of portfolios. I turn the drawing upside down for a few minutes to check if the composition is balanced after which I carefully remove the paper from my drawing board and coat it with a light spray of fixative, not for the silverpoint, but for the small amounts of graphite on the drawing. When the fixative is dry I further protect my drawing with a piece of brown kraft paper and place both drawing and cover carefully into a designated portfolio of work. These in turn are stored in one of many drawers in my horizontal storage unit or placed in their portfolios in clear plastic bags for storage on the loft of my studio. Sometimes I file my drawings according to style and sometimes according to a theme or specific subject matter. Academy drawings are the longest of all my works. They are carefully crafted according to traditions of centuries ago and the result is a high degree of realism especially in human form. My second style is the Renaissance drawing which is more spontaneous, but still within the boundaries of tradition. The third style is the throw-all-caution-to-the-wind effect of drawing on mixed-media surfaces. Even though I may draw on the mixed-media surface with conventional tools such as silverpoint, carbon pencils, guache, colour pencils and chalk, it still remains an unpredictable work whose outcome isn't decided until I am nearly done. I consider it a wonderful blessing to be free to switch between these styles whenever I wish. In fact, now that I have completed Krista, I will switch to some Renaissance style drawings in sanguine and sepia chinks. I have a special supply of Russian-made chinks, perfect for the next adventure in my studio.

Some of my favourite media with which to draw are the time-honoured and traditional Conté and Wolff's carbon pencils, graphite pencils, Prismacolor pencils, and conté sticks in the usual array of sanguine and sepia. To create large drawings I will mix "puddles" of colour using watercolour or guache. When dry, these puddles become inspiration for random shapes and background for representational drawings. The mixed-media surfaces for silverpoint I have already explained and sometimes I use copper and brass instead of silver. Pen-and-ink is reserved for *en plein air* sketches, often in brown inks when I work in the forest. Another favourite medium and technique I use often is monotyping. In its simplest form, I place random splatters of India ink on glass and spread alcohol over the ink. As fast as possible, I place paper over the mixture and *pull* one-of-a-kind prints from the rapidly drying ink. These become backgrounds to my *petites noir* drawings. Guache and water monoprints are less demanding in that I can take more time to pull prints. Sometimes, the entire floor of my studio is covered with monoprints that need to dry thoroughly before I press them flat. One of the messier techniques is a process I developed in which I *patinize* paper. I spread flat-white primer latex paint on cover-weight drawing paper and while it is still wet, I spread copper paint into the mix. I often use a circular mat to create my "copper moon" shapes. When all the paints have dried, I apply a second coat of copper paint accompanied by random spreading under tracing paper and a lucite roller, and while the

copper paint is still wet, I spread a clear patinizing solution over the mix. I let the final mix sit as I watch with fascination how the patinizing solution gives the entire "copper moon" an antique, greenish-oxide effect. It makes for great drawing with soft Pitt black oil-pencils.

Some artists prefer to draw on an angle with their paper mounted on a drafting table. I prefer to draw in the upright position or in the painting position, with my paper taped to a drawing board held securely in place on a painter's easel. First of all, a painter's position allows soot and other drawing debris to fall straight down without collecting on the drawing. It makes for cleaner drawings. When I use carbon pencils I usually mask off areas after I have completed them so as not to get them dirty. Another reason for a painter's position is that it allows me to see the drawing at any time in its proper perspective thus eliminating one of the most common errors in angled drawing, namely that of *parallax*. Parallax is a natural reaction to a drawing that gets closer and closer to the artist's body as he or she leans over the work. The artist starts off big and bold at the top of the drawing with arm outstretched. However, as the drawing gets closer to the bottom, or to the waist of the artist, arm movement lessens and the drawing becomes disproportionately smaller. Parallax is the most common cause for figure drawings that are out of proportion. Working in the painter's position avoids parallax. I am speaking about those drawings that require up-close-and-personal attention and in a seated position, such as my carefully crafted academy drawings. Larger, more spontaneous drawings are created at full arms-length, usually in a standing position.

Regardless of media and techniques I use to draw, I purpose to remain alive and fresh in my work, by constantly changing styles, techniques, and media, and by experimenting with new mixed-media and grounds on paper. I even mix expressionist and abstract techniques with ancient design disciplines such as the "*Golden Section*," a Greek mathematical invention dating back to somewhere around 500 AD. And to satisfy my passion for variety as well as excellence, I will often create major studio drawings, such as my "story drawings." These drawings tell a story of sorts in a large composition of line and form, by placing the composition within an invisible but very present Golden Section grid. One such drawing was titled, "a prayer of choice" and told a story of Coast Salish carver, Richard Krentz. Drawing can be such fun. Drawing is also more than capable of spanning the fullness of creative time, from ancient mathematical disciplines to Renaissance techniques and from impressionist discoveries to abstractions of all kinds, to create a body of work that is as contemporary and *vogue* as any expression of our attention-grabbing sibling, better known as painting.

When all fountains of drawing seem to have dried up, I switch to painting large canvasses, just to get the stiffness out of my creative bones. It may sound like a cliché, but "there is never a dull moment in my studio," especially the *conchetto* works which incorporate a vigorous process of flinging paint, dripping, splattering and rubbing in the manner of action painting of the fifties and sixties. Like my granddaughter Haley, who fingerpaints on the floor, I "fingerpaint" on canvas. Now that's cool!

And if I am not drawing or painting, the studio is a place to write.

When I enlarged my studio space, that is, when I re-arranged my studio to make room for more painting space, I moved my computer and files to a spare room just off the livingroom. It now serves as my writing space. John Gould once said that he never met a real artist who couldn't write. My mentor of yesteryear, the great Michelangelo, was a prolific writer as well. He wrote some five-hundred sonnets and the entire

collection is carefully published by Yale University in English and Latin, as "*The Poetry of Michelangelo*." So, I am in good company when I say I too love to write. My writings span some thirty-five years in the form of poetry and commentary. For the past ten years I have written for our local newspaper sharing my thoughts in a column about my journey of faith. In 1997, I decided to commit my thoughts on art to a series of essays which I have titled, "*art of the spirit*." These thoughts have grown into a collection of essays and commentary about art and my journey through the arts, a collection that now comprises a second volume altogether with some one hundred topics of discussion. Some have been published in *Bottega*, the journal and newsletter of the *Drawing Society of Canada*. In 1998, I began "*in search of a city*," an epic poem inspired by my natural surroundings and motivated by my spiritual quest. In addition to these essays and poems, I have written about and researched classical drawing disciplines, the art of silverpoint drawing, a special work called "*Homeward Bound*," about who these Verstraete's are and where they came from (my father wrote the first volume), and last but not least a number of writings about spiritual matters.

Bright-red numbers on my clock tell me it is five-o'clock in the afternoon. Already the day is very dark. I began my day in the studio in darkness and end the day as such. But all is not darkness. When summer is in full swing, daylight floods my studio very early and the last rays of sunshine linger for as long as ten to ten-thirty at night. Summer is a special time to work in the studio as well as a special time to brighten my days with long hours *en plein air*, somewhere on Vancouver Island and preferably deep inside a forest or on the log-strewn beaches of Pacific Rim National Park. I am tired after my day's work, but I feel satisfied *Krista* is a good drawing and the prospect of a new day and a new beginning in the studio, leaves me feeling at peace within and without. I sense the next drawing is ready for takeoff.

Soon it will be summer.

The weather channel has promised more fog tonight. Inevitably however, one day, November will turn into December and then another new year will dawn, another spring, and at last summer, when my studio becomes the great outdoors.

Thank you for keeping me company during this special visit to my studio.

Ps. You are invited to visit my studio anytime at www.gverstraete.com