

The quality of light, the tone, the habit and the dream: The landscape paintings of Bewabon Shilling

In psychology, passing through a gate is an “event boundary,” which is perhaps a too-fancy way to describe how leaving one place and entering another is an occurrence significant enough to prompt your mind to shed all details that it deems superfluous. It’s an evolutionary trick to clear your focus on a new environment and its new (and potentially dangerous) stimuli. It’s also why you forget what you came for when you enter a new room to retrieve it.ⁱ

To get to Bewabon Shilling’s studio you must first go through a gate. It’s a remarkable gate, wrought iron with an open-mouthed face haloed by radiating vectors of light, and emblematic of his home and the two generations of remarkable artists who have worked and resided there. Instinctually, the gate seems protective: it’s a closed circuit of a world, Bewabon’s home and studio, and the gate is the switch that completes and encloses it. But having passed through this gate, I can also attest to the work that it does in clearing one’s mind of all that’s irrelevant. There is a palpable hum to the studio produced by the artists it holds. It is a busy place, and the work that happens there charges everything with play and possibility.

I visited Bewabon’s studio on October 11, 2019. It was the kind of fall day that makes you nostalgic for the season even at the height of summer, even knowing that winter follows close at hand. All throughout the drive from Barrie to Rama Mnjikaning First Nation the autumn colours blazed, their banner showing a response to the generally mild fall we’d experienced thus far, all sunny days and crisp nights, and no hard frosts yet to diminish their colour. The gate was open when we arrived, and we didn’t see Bewabon’s partner, Tanya Cunnington, disguised by the cedar and poplar trees that clustered around her as she sunned herself on a second-story porch halfway up the three-story studio building. The poplar’s carotene glow was only more evident as we climbed the stairs to greet Tanya and enter the studio, where large windows framed a view that was echoed by one of Bewabon’s canvasses beside it. The scene—the latest of Bewabon’s *Forest* series—captured the density of colour, texture and tone of the trees outside, laid out in systematic licks of pure, unmuddied colour.

By now Bewabon had joined us, and he pointed out his easel below, close to the fire pit. “I like to work over there,” he said, after gesturing to a different clearing in the dense brush a bit further from the house, “but a bear’s been coming around.” The bear was an oddity, mostly because he was the only uninvited guest at what clearly is a busy gathering place. Annie Kmyta Cunnington, Tanya’s mother, dropped into the studio for a few minutes just after our tour of the building. She—like Bewabon, like Tanya, like so many who find themselves there—is an artist, and her praise for the painting I just described was effusive. The consensus amongst the artists in the room was that it was only possible to start painting in the fall, that summer was anathema to their work—something about the light, something about the unrelenting (and uninspiring) green scrim of summer foliage. Then, too, the studio itself: not air-conditioned, its many windows heating the building to an unbearable fug.

To neglect to mention the studio itself is to neglect to mention a central character in this story. When I had spoken to Bewabon on the phone earlier in the summer, he wasn’t painting—but he was working. The work he was undertaking was on the structure of the studio itself, rebuilding it like the mythological Argo: piece by piece from within, lovingly, always maintaining the idiosyncratic character of the building his late father, the artist Arthur Shilling, had brought into the world during Bewabon’s early childhood. The three-story conical building reifies the idea that art can rebuild a world anew, that effort and care can hold a space for people to create safely, tucked away from the glare of public scrutiny. Bewabon’s and Tanya’s stewardship of the building is inspired in part by an early reading of John Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row*, with its protagonists collectively amassing a makeshift world apart from the ravages of Depression-era capitalism.ⁱⁱ Shared effort is

key to this: even my partner Scott, who joined me that day, was drawn into the work of the space, asked by Bewabon if he could sort out the feedback on a little record player that piped Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* to both Tanya's and Bewabon's studios that afternoon.

Bewabon's prolific output from the past two months not only testified to his hard work from late August onwards, but also fulfilled the promise of the building itself: the richly coloured paintings that filled Bewabon's studio spoke to the dream his father must have once had, pouring a foundation for a building that would outlast him, and which now Bewabon hopes to outlast himself. In Bewabon's forest series I saw the progression of the poplars around the studio from peach to flaming orange as beside me Bewabon carefully chipped out debris in the painting's surface, relics from the tossed-up winds that had blown across his canvas as he worked outside days before. The five or so paintings each held so much beauty, but collectively they spoke to the passage of time, the inexorable seasons that tug us forward, and the landscape that endures and outlasts our human activities.

The focus of our studio visit was largely on works created in the last year, which marked a critical juncture in Bewabon's practice. Prior to this year, Bewabon had been working on highly detailed field and river paintings, capturing their tessellated colours in near-abstract dabs of oil paint. As Bewabon turned to this motif over and over, the horizon line moved up and finally off the canvas, removing the one referent that tethered these paintings to reality. *Beyond the Border* (2019) demonstrates a transition from these earlier works, the bottom third of the painting a sunlight-dappled field laid down densely. What is different is the big sky above, suffused with a clementine glow that Bewabon has dragged through the clouds in confident, sweeping brushwork. Linking Bewabon's tight and loose brushstrokes are brown hills and fields in the middle distance, with luxurious sweeping pink gestures landing like late afternoon sunlight on distant pastures.

What links all of Bewabon's works, throughout his career, is his attention to light and its transformative relationship to colour. A watershed experience in Bewabon's career was a year spent in Florence, Italy as a student at the Ontario College of Art and Design. Working in a communal studio with young artists he still considers friends, Bewabon walked the streets of Florence, visited museums and took life drawing classes. Much ink has been spilled describing the light of various Italian cities, but Florence maintains a unique hold on many artists: "To see the sun sink down, drowned in pink and purple and golden floods, and overwhelm Florence with tides of colour that make all the sharp lines dim and faint and turn the solid city to a city of dreams, is a sight to stir the coldest nature, and make a sympathetic one drunk with ecstasy," wrote Mark Twain in 1892.ⁱⁱⁱ Listening to Bewabon and Tanya talk about a recent reunion with classmates in this program while looking at Bewabon's painting of Skeleton Lake at sunset, I saw how the experiences of Italy played a role in this epic realization of this region's light.

Our discussion of how to exhibit work from diverse series of paintings was a long one—Bewabon's output has always been varied, responsive to the landscape and experimental in its reaching—but we all agreed that the Janice Laking Gallery, with its skylight saturating the space with a cool grey light during the short winter days, would suit the watchful qualities of Bewabon's landscapes. When we left, we brought with us with one of Bewabon's recent paintings, which he had generously donated to the gallery for our annual fundraising auction. "It's dry, but tender," he said, which made me laugh in the moment but in hindsight has a kind of poetry.

I would return in a couple of weeks to pack up the paintings for the exhibition, after we all had time to process how they would hang in the space. By the time I was back, the leaves had fallen from the trees and were being ground to humus in the mud. The gate once again stood open, and as we walked for a few minutes in the copse of poplars behind the studio, Bewabon's and Tanya's son arrived home from school. Once inside, a fire was going in the living room and some sort of incense was burning on the hearth; it was smoky and warm, but still humming with activity. Bewabon and Tanya were preparing to go to a residency in BC, and their studio would soon be occupied by Craig Mainprize, another artist in the region, who would use the space

in exchange for looking after their geriatric cat. As we loaded the truck on that rainy, late October day, the studio's emptiness felt momentarily bereft. But just as the gate had cleared our focus for the work at hand, the empty studio cleared Bewabon's focus for the work yet to come. This is the dream of that studio and the habit of the artists who have lived and worked there: creation is another form of renewal; the work requires that we return to it, and the activity of one day is a seed for another.

— Emily McKibbon

Bewabon Shilling was born in 1977 in Orillia, Ontario. He studied at the Ontario College of Art and Design, where he received both the Norman Jewison Award and the Rose of Cedarvale Scholarship. He has exhibited at Roberts Gallery, Toronto; the Gary Farmer Gallery, Santa Fe; Orillia Museum of Art and History; and Kensington Fine Art, Calgary. He is represented by Roberts Gallery, Toronto; the Collectors Gallery, Calgary; and the Darrell Bell Gallery, Saskatoon.

ⁱ Office of Public Affairs and Communication, "Walking through doorways causes forgetting, new research shows," November 16, 2011. Available online: <https://news.nd.edu/news/walking-through-doorways-causes-forgetting-new-research-shows/>. Accessed October 18, 2019

ⁱⁱ The title for this essay is also taken from *Cannery Row*. In the foreword to the work, Steinbeck writes: "Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream." I can't think of a stink or a grating noise that I encountered while visiting Bewabon's studio, but the rest holds true.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Margaret Miner and Hugh Rawson, *The Oxford Dictionary of American Quotations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): 123

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