

Ray Ward

Living of the Landscape



Seastacks at Bamfield, oil, 12 x 16 in.

I Ray Ward was born in Courtenay, B.C., an eastern town on Vancouver Island ripe with windswept beaches, rolling clouds and rugged forests. The West coast wilderness left an indelible impression on the artist, one that is conveyed in the beauty of landscapes he paints that express a myriad of moods – from the watchful trees that

peer through a morning fog, bruised skies and white water that ambushes rock-dotted beaches.

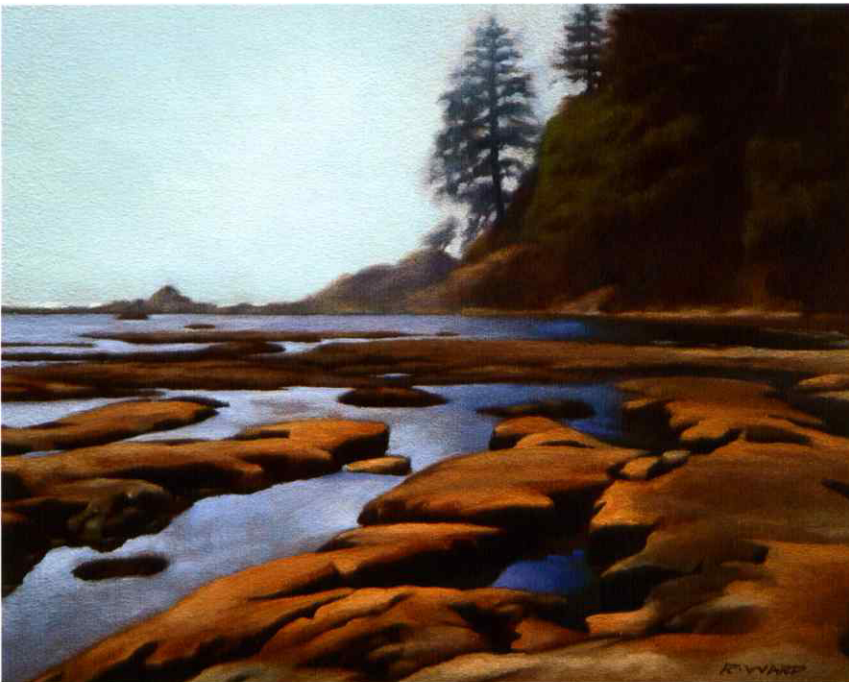
Growing up in the rural environment, Ward spent a lot of time outdoors. “I was lucky to grow up on a hobby farm,” he says, something that made him popular with the childhood friends who wanted to play with the variety of animals his family cared for. “It was a

good life; a good upbringing,” says the artist as he recalls the formative years where days outside stretched long and were spent on adventures with his friends.

From that young age, Ward developed an early talent for drawing and often painted and sketched in his spare time after school. “A lot of kids in my class asked me to draw things for them,”



Summer Alpine, Revelstoke, oil, 12 x 24 in.



Sandstone Beach, West Coast Trail, oil, 8 x 10 in.

he says. It was this early validation from his peers that set the tone for his life's career. "My mother still has all of my paintings on the walls, paintings I did when I was twelve years old. Maybe it's time I gave her a new one," he muses with a laugh.

After high school, his dream to pursue art steered Ward to the mainland. At the age of 20, Ward packed up and along with his girlfriend Heidi, moved to North Vancouver in 1988 to attend

Capilano College's commercial art program. After graduation he began working as a freelance illustrator.

"My plan was to be an illustrator for 20 years and then become an artist," says Ward. That plan lasted just one year when he realized that freelance illustration wasn't something he could picture himself doing for that long. Ward did odd jobs like roofing while he reconsidered his future. "I was the only one on the roofing crew who hadn't

been in jail," he says of the difficult job that became a catalyst for his future career as an artist.

For the next several years, Ward worked as a stonemason during the day and painted at night, developing the foundational skills he learned in school on the canvas. During that time, Ward completed the Federation of Canadian Artists Foundation program and began showing his work. In the spring of 2000 he received his signature status as an Associate Member and his work was picked up by a gallery.

Since then, Ward and Heidi, who are now married, returned to Vancouver Island and set up home in Nanaimo, about 100km south of Courtenay. Working as a full-time artist much earlier than he had planned, Ward has learned to develop a productive painting schedule.

"I used to work around Heidi's schedule as a nurse but that got a bit difficult as she changed shifts. Now I have my own schedule and get up early and paint in the morning. Then I'll take the dog for a walk. As an artist it's easy to take days off," he admits, although it can put a crimp in his productivity. "It's nice to have flexibility as an artist but I have to stay disciplined."

During the frequent travels the couple has made to Australia, Europe,



Conifer Stand, Rockies, oil, 8 x 16 in.

South East Asia and Central and South America, Ward found inspiration in the variety of cultures, painting local and European street scenes, cityscapes, and marine subjects.

"When I was in Europe I saw firsthand many of the artists who have influenced me." These include masters like Vermeer, Winslow Homer, N.C. Wyeth, and contemporary artists Burton Silverman, Richard Schmid and Kevin Courter.

Since then, Ward's focus has turned closer to home, back to the rugged West coast landscapes that shaped his youth. Today, he enjoys hiking and camping around Vancouver Island. These local adventures have stirred his creative juices and today he focuses mainly on West coast themes.

"I want people to get a sense of what I was feeling when I experience a place. With colour, atmosphere and light I try to create a mood that is tangible."

Ward enjoys experimenting with different surfaces and techniques to find ways of more expressive interpretations. "My style is changing and becoming more atmospheric. I use low lights and incorporate mood from early morning light to the fading light of day as well as fog and mist," he says.

Working primarily in oils, Ward



Evening Sky Reflected, oil study, 12 x 12 in.

works in a converted outbuilding on his property. His studio used to be an office that he renovated into an artist's space. "I tore out the carpets and painted the walls and made it into a livable space," he says. Although the studio is filled with natural light from a huge picture window, the floor isn't insulated, so a space heater and a pair of warm slip-

pers get Ward through cold winter days.

Every artist has their own process. Ray Ward's process begins on a small scale sketch before graduating to a paper-sized study and then to the full magnitude of a landscape. It is reminiscent of his days as an illustrator, creating thumbnail sketches during the concept stage.



Warm Light on Evening Surf, oil, 9 x 12 in.

"I use reference photos for most of my work. Then I make a thumbnail sketch before I create an eight by ten study, which I use as a guide for actual larger painting," he explains. This is followed by a series of editing and cropping techniques until Ward is satisfied with the final composition.

When he is ready to tackle the canvas, Ward covers the entire surface in a wash of burnt umber or ultra blue. He uses a grisaille underpainting technique and works in layers until he begins a subtractor process, removing paint and lightening areas using rags, cotton swabs or brushes.

"I want my paintings to look real, but when you look closer I want it to look like a painting, to see brushstrokes and underpainting. I don't want to hide my

process," he says. "I'm interested in creating a visually intriguing painting surface, with thin and thick areas of paint."

He and Heidi love Nanaimo, where they live in the centre of a living landscape that offers new material for canvases everyday. Looking forward, Ward is eagerly awaiting the arrival of a special outdoor easel he ordered so he can take it with him on his travels. "I haven't painted onsite, not since my school days, but look forward to doing it again." Ward will be exposed to the elements and admits that he'll have to paint a lot faster and edit a lot less but looks forward to the spontaneity of onsite painting.

"Being an artist can be a bit lonely sometimes," he muses. "If I were still in Vancouver, I'd probably get out a lot

more. I like to live in isolation but it is nice to get out once in awhile." For now, he plans to keep exploring the island for new vistas. **I**

Ingrid de Jong

Ray Ward is represented by: White Rock Gallery, White Rock, B.C.; Peninsula Gallery, Sidney, B.C.; Hambleton Galleries, Kelowna, B.C.