

Donald Lake: 2018 Recipient of WHS Lifetime Achievement Award

by Christine Buth-Furness, Newsletter Editor

Congratulations to Donald Lake, recipient of the 2018 WHS Lifetime Achievement Award! Donald is honored to be the recipient of this award and although I didn't get to interview him in person, I asked him to share his thoughts on the art of painting in watercolor. For more information about his work please visit his website at <https://www.donlakeart.com>. Please enjoy reading his insightful and inspiring responses and perusing his beautiful imagery. - *Christine Buth-Furness*

Early influence...

I was always interested in drawing as a kid, but only in an ordinary way, one of many hobbies and interests I had. My parents always made sure I had art supplies. But a major influence came when I visited the art museum and saw a show of very large abstract expressionist paintings. I was very excited by those paintings and thought then that if this is what an artist does, I want to be an artist. It was a powerful thing for a kid and that remained my goal and my image of what I wanted to do for many years.

Realist industrial vs. landscape images studio vs. plein aire...

Much of the work I have done is studio work. I have always understood "major work" as being a large undertaking that requires time, effort and expertise to execute. I spent thirty-eight years as a professor of art and that job, done properly, is truly a full time job. Given my family and all that means, I had very limited time late at night to paint. That's one factor that led to my slow deliberate process and one I could stop and start, and work on in bits over several weeks. Also, at the time I began to make the shift from big and more raw abstract oil paintings, I was spending much of my day teaching students how to draw realistically and with high technique. That focus came into my own work as I had returned to drawing, looking to make a new start. I was using whatever materials I had, and some old tubes of watercolor became ingredients in my drawings. That is how I got started, slowly, using watercolor as a material. Before too long I was finding ways to use it with some control, to fit into the realist drawings I was making. That interest grew and before long I attempted my first "real art" with watercolor alone.

So, my initial involvement with watercolor was in putting it to a very controlled realist purpose and that way of thinking continues more or less to this day. Working in that manner also fit into the work time I had, perhaps three hours per night, slowly building a finished painting. And keep in mind that was in the early seventies when Photo Realist work was dominant in the art world, so tight realism seemed a worthy direction to be taking. I had real uneasiness about using my photographs as source material, given my education and purpose as an abstract expressionist. But I found ways to use the photos in chunks and in combinations that seemed useful and also avoided the dreaded idea of painting from photos. I used masks to keep the rest of my paper clean and hidden as I painted in the exposed area and thereby kept that small bit rather detached from the forms around it. Each piece was about a day's work and would be made up of whatever elements fit inside the mask. Eventually I became practical about the use of photos as I realized their usefulness and that paintings follow their own impulses. (More about that later.)

However, that way of working with watercolor rules out some of the most dynamic and exciting aspects of the medium, not to mention its history as a portable medium suited to on location painting. I found the balance to slow methodical studio methods in going outside to paint in a loose way. I generally only use a large round brush, nothing smaller than a 12 round so that I avoid the small detailed work I would normally do in the studio. On location work is done in three hours or less, to accommodate the change of light and make a broad statement about what is there in front of me. It is a high-risk, high-reward way of working and one that I find a very enjoyable counterbalance to my more slow and sustained studio methods. And besides, that immediacy is like drawing--direct, gestural. Drawing is so integral to whatever I'm doing and on location painting



*Blast Furnace, 37" x 25",
Watercolor, Donald Lake*

is for me a loose drawing. When on camping trips I have worked in sketchbooks shifting back and forth from drawing to watercolor without giving much thought to why. They are largely one in the same way of directly working from what's in front of me.

(More about realist painting....)

As a painter who works in realism, there is often a sort of misguided criticism based on verisimilitude. It is as if the purpose of painting is to see if you can make it "as real as a photograph." Often people don't know that to make something "real" is an effort in editing, what you leave out, what you invent in, how you move pieces around and how you treat it. I would say that I COULD make it look like a photograph but the viewer would be disappointed if I did. My work is a painting with all that implies. Photographs as a resource ARE part of my studio working process, but they are

not what I'm about. I have all the other concerns about drawing and color and emphasis and light and surface that a painter in other idioms has. It shortchanges my effort to imagine that I am only reproducing a photograph.

That I work in watercolor also adds some "expectations." Many people made a watercolor painting in the sixth grade and expect watercolors to be loose, runny, pale wet-into-wet things. And they may expect a certain kind of subject or form. My work doesn't generally fit into that frame. So I think many people look at my paintings and are very aware that it is outside their expectations, hopefully in a good way. Actually, many painters can do what I can do, but you almost have to be looking at a lot of art to know that. For me, after forty-some years of doing this it doesn't seem remarkable, but I know that my experience in this work is not at all what the viewer brings to the paintings.

To make a realist watercolor requires that you know when and how to handle watercolor in its many techniques. I spend about as much time working large wet washes over each other as I do in rendering small details. I spend a lot of time moving the paint around which is already dry on the sheet, taking some off, putting some on. I may paint a three inch square in a long day's work, or I may paint a three by four foot area with a three inch brush in ten or so layers during an afternoon's work. I know more about specific types of watercolor paper than I can put into words. I have different ways of using my eyes to see something besides the things there in front of me. I see little difference in painting the landscape from a fishing boat and painting from photographs and memories, except for the speed and bold directness required when painting on location. In any case, when you paint in a realist mode, drawing is what you're doing, sometimes with a pencil and sometimes with a brush, always seeing the subject as a collection of contrasts and sizes and alignments of shapes. It comes to you as a pattern

that grows, changes, reveals things. I have often said –and it is a truth most artists know—that drawing as a way of learning about something, is the equal of reading and writing. People who learn to draw have learned a wonderful foreign language that reveals things words cannot.

Since I am interested in the way things look, there is a realist bias in what I paint. I have at periods in my studio life painted the same subject areas for years at a time. Most notably I painted images of American industry for about fifteen years and it is the work for which I am best known, or most identified since I sort of "owned" that imagery for a long time. Few others found in that sort of imagery the intensity of interest that I did. To walk into a factory or industrial plant excited all my senses and those places reminded me of my own experience working in a factory during my college years.



'57 Airstream Caravanner, 20.5" x 28", Watercolor, Donald Lake



Winter Sticks, 28" x 40.5", Watercolor, Donald Lake



Sun Setting Behind Trees, 16.5" x 32", Watercolor, Donald Lake

Lately though, most of my work has to do with the landscape—places I've loved for a long time, and new places that have stuck in my mind so much that I have tried to paint them. We travel a lot in a camping trailer and have visited a lot of places. Sometimes I recognize "something" that seems special, remarkable, talks

to me in some vague hard-to-know way except to know this is a special place, or a special light, ...something. I shoot pictures at those times, and sometimes I am somewhere I can draw or paint right there. If not, I take home those photos and those memories and sometimes some notes and over time, most of those things don't turn into anything. But sometimes there is a lasting nag that demands some attention and those usually turn into a painting, or five paintings, or something. I spent over ten years trying to paint the essence of my experiences in the Flint Hills of Kansas around property we bought and love. Other times I've painted the drama I felt at certain seashores, or at a southwestern canyon location, or up in the wilderness of the Boundary Waters. My early work was focused on shiny objects—fire trucks, world war II vintage aircraft, and other bodies of work were prompted by my backyard swimming pool and the figures in it. I'm painting shiny manmade objects again lately with my recent infatuation with Airstream trailers.

I've painted the figure but I don't think of myself as a figure painter. I sometimes think that putting a figure into the sort of paintings I make can render them more an illustration—the story of THAT figure in that space rather than the viewer being required to put HIMSELF as the participant in the pictorial space. To derive anything from a painting requires that you bring your own life experience and memories to the reading of a painting. It "makes you think about" something similar you may have done or seen and allows you to find the personal meaning in the picture. I tend to think that is more likely for the viewer if I don't put realistic figures in my paintings.

An artist is recording his life in some form, responding with his medium to the things that are important to him. For me, it is trying to be aware, notice the things around me that seem important at the moment, think about what I'm seeing and about why that place or that moment seems remarkable to me. In that sense, the whole body of my work is a record of my life, kind of organized by the decade, more or less. As in many aspects of life, that is easier to see in retrospect, now in the long view.

Each painting changes me in some way, and I hope to realize something new as I work. I gradually discard old things that once seemed so important, and I add a new color or tool or technique. And because I work with representational imagery, I am informed about some place or thing or about form in general. So growth is a slow process of small changes, not a startling revelation. When I am struck by a new awareness or recognize a new idea as I paint, I find that very satisfying. Between those times, I always like to draw, feel the touch of the paper, and watch the illusion build on the page. That may be the most dependable reward.

"Each painting changes me in some way, and I hope to realize something new as I work".

About some influences...

I have come to appreciate the masters of the medium far more now than I did as a young person. I know what I'm seeing now, after a lifetime of working in watercolor and their lessons are far more clear, accessible. But other artists have been influential as well, the famous and not famous ones that have befriended me, or supported me as time went along. I had some

encouraging teachers and later, fellow artists who have kept me on track, offered timely advice or sage comments. Two painters in particular -- **Glenn Bradshaw**, and especially **Harold Gregor** who by their example demonstrate what it means to be an artist, have been friends and mentors and have had much to do with the choices I've made and the successes I've had.

About juried shows and such....

There are a lot of ways to be an artist. One can work their way up the ladder of juried competitions. Or you can pursue the realm of academe. Or you can enter the world of galleries and representation. Or you may find a path in workshop teaching. It may give a kind of validation to achieve success in one of these arenas. Regardless of the process, it is the work that ultimately is the reward. For myself, I found all the time spent entering and packing and the shipping expenses to be kind of spinning my wheels with my limited studio time, so I didn't pursue all those credentials of being in all the big shows. Perhaps because of my generation, I thought some success in the galleries was the goal and I sought that. I did always think Watercolor USA was the premier show for watercolor and I often submitted work there if not lots of other shows. My life was dedicated more to teaching than to studio work, so I consider my work there to be my most important contribution as an artist. I am proud to be an artist and I look back upon a lifetime of work mostly in watercolor satisfied that I've done the best work I can in a professional way.

About “watercolor is so hard”...

I have taught watercolor and water media painting for over forty years in all kinds of settings. Like other things, watercolor requires you learn the physical skills of doing it. It may be more unforgiving than some other painting media, yes, but it is regarded as “difficult” only by those who haven't taken the time to learn how to manage it. It is not hard to undo a lot of problems or invent your way past them once you learn how. If people fail it is usually because they didn't go far enough, not that they went too far. Learn about papers, learn the areas of dry layering, wet into wet dynamics, brushwork and texture, and learn about your pigments and the critical nature of value. Try everything and never stop experimenting to learn more. It's not a recipe. I have never started a painting without that background feeling of “I wonder if I can do this” because painting in any medium is problem solving. If it isn't challenging anymore, you're not doing it right. We are not artisans, **we are artists**, creative professionals. Know the difference.