

# From Halifax, a sojourn to a month in Normandy

**SEAN FLINN**

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HALIFAX -- Jonathan Johnson takes a long sip from a takeout coffee, finishing it off. It's the day after the opening of Nova Scotia/Normandy, his solo show of paintings at Gallery Page and Strange in downtown Halifax.

"This by far is my biggest show," says Johnson, a 31-year-old Halifax-based artist who had his first major solo exhibition at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton in 2004. He's represented by Peter Buckland Gallery in Saint John and Wynick/Tuck in Toronto.

The size of the current show, Johnson says, speaks to "the scope and idea of two bodies of work having an inner dialogue within the gallery."

These are landscape paintings of Normandy, France, and Nova Scotia (the latter often urban sites) that depict two places where time and change occur slowly, but occur nonetheless, whether it's a row of hedges or condo buildings growing in the distance. "I do paint representationally," the artist says. "There really was a place, there really was a time."

Though he produced the paintings in his Halifax studio (with the exception of a series of small panels created in Normandy), the ideas took root during a unique residency at La Fenderie, a 22-acre former foundry and still-working dairy farm in Normandy, where he spent the month of July last year.

Johnson, who sees himself as "part of a tradition, a continuum" of Canadian (The Group of Seven) and French (Cézanne, Bonnard and Matisse) landscape painting, stayed at the property as a guest of Blayne Collins, a Toronto artist and collector who co-owns the property with her ex-husband. Besides being a holiday home for her family (she has two daughters), La Fenderie was always envisioned to include a residence for individual and small groups of artists.

"Where we are, it's very green, quite hilly," says Collins on the phone from Toronto. "You drive about 10 minutes away and you're in this very flat land called the Plains of Argentan. That's the name of the town that's near us. It's a wide, flat range of land that grows wheat. So there's golden fields, and poppies - it's just so picturesque."

Collins found out about Johnson's painting through a recommendation from Gerry Ferguson, who taught the young painter at Halifax's NSCAD University; and also when she stumbled on Johnson's work at the Toronto International Art Fair. "I was walking by and I was struck by this turquoise sky and this brushwork and I went in and looked at it," she recalls. "I liked the spontaneity of it and the bold use of brush and the moodiness he puts in his work. The urban landscapes were interesting to me too." And so the invitation to La Fenderie was made.

The emphasis of the residency, Collins says, is on informality and independence. "Once you get here, there's free room and board and you do what you like. There are no expectations ... on the amount of work you have to do every day," she says. "Sometimes you just have to be in a quiet place and figure out what your next move is."

Johnson had many moves he could make each day. He could grab a bike and explore the limestone-dominated landscape, the nearby lakes used by a local trout farmer and the dense forest. Or he could hitch a ride with Collins on her way to the Saturday-morning market in Sées, or visit the studio of local artist Didier Avenal.

Johnson also spent a week exploring the Louvre and the Pompidou Centre, a first Paris pilgrimage for the artist. "I've always been interested in historical painting. I've always been interested in history. Even as a kid, it was history that really brought me to art," he says.

"You can't go and look at Monet's Water Lilies and not think about painting itself, techniques of painting and how the painting is constructed."

The museum visits and the time in what Collins calls an "authentic" landscape, little touched by mass tourism, changed Johnson's approach. Once back in his studio in late-summer last year, he found himself "thinking

about how to activate the whole surface." The paint, he says, is starting to "dance and spread apart."

Collins herself has made installation and object-based art, work that's drawn on domestic crafts and explored the body and body image, including a project for last September's Nuit Blanche in Toronto's Distillery District, where she has her studio.

In Normandy, Collins and Johnson often engaged in long conversations about each other's work and of art in general.

"The door [to Johnson's studio] was open," Collins says.

"I'd go in and see what was happening and he'd talk about it a bit." But she was careful to encourage only, not question. "Well I'd say, 'I like this sketch here.' "

Collins hasn't seen the canvases yet, only the preparatory drawings and small panels Johnson produced in Normandy. She's excited.

A proud patron? No way, she says. "Well, that's a pretty formal word. I wouldn't consider myself that. But I would say that it gives me a lot of pleasure to have had someone so talented have a first-time experience in France."

*Nova Scotia/Normandy runs at Halifax's Gallery Page and Strange until May 16.*

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INTERVIEW | JONATHAN JOHNSON

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BY SEAN FURN FOLEY

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Jonathan Johnson says his paint started to 'dance' after studying and painting French landscapes. Above, Normandy Valley.

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Blayne Collins, artist, collector and co-owner of La Ferrière

groups of artists.

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