

Karen Brown's specialty: bees' wax painting

By Constance Scrafield

Although Karen Brown has a degree from Guelph University as a horticulturalist, in agronomy, her original interest was in archeology.

'I realized that in order to really be part of the profession, I would have to get my PhD. I didn't want to stay in school that long,' she commented, 'so, I finished my studies at Guelph University.'

For a farmer's daughter, agronomy might have been the better fit and, certainly, it led her to the job she has kept for the last 21 years: as assistant supervisor for Granite Ridge Golf Course, just north of Milton.

She is actually based in Erin, and we met Brown at the Alton Mill Arts Centre, where her beautiful paintings of flowers and other flora were on display during the centre's recent Fire and Ice Festival. They were deeply textured and we asked her how she had done them.

'They're encaustic paintings,' she replied. 'I use bees' wax, mixed with paint and other oils to get the consistency and the texture.' Later in this month, we had the chance to talk further on the telephone about her art and the craft and skill in making an encaustic painting.

Heat is the definitive element of creating an encaustic work. Artists back to Egypt used this method for painting on wood, most famously, the Fayum mummy portraits from the period 100 to 300 AD. The method has also been used in ancient times up the 19th century in other non-European cultures.

It seems that encaustic painting faded from fashion until the 20th century, especially later when it enjoyed a resurgence. Brown is one of the artists who loves the flexibility of the technique. She includes damar resin which comes from trees in India or East Asia. 'I use the sap,' she explained, 'there can be bits of bark in it - makes for really nice texture.'

'Every artist has his own recipe,' she said. 'Some use castor wax. I also use white wax, which is the bees' wax that has been under the sun. Some of the pollen from the wax gets bleached out by the sun - not all of it, of course.'

Relating her history with art, she said, 'I painted oil paintings - did art at university. But oil painting takes time and life got in the way. After university, I did murals - I've used lots of different mediums and then was busy and didn't do much.'

It was at an event at the Alton Mill that Brown was first introduced to encaustic painting.

'I learned to do encaustic painting with Andrea Bird, who had her studio open that day with an invitation to 'try it'.' Instantly captivated, Brown signed up for a work shop. That was nine years ago and she has been having fun with encaustic painting ever since.

It is, in particular, the flexibility that she enjoys.

'Every time I put a layer of wax on the painting, it has to be reheated, which makes it more durable,' she said. 'I've been doing this for nine years and I can actually go back to a piece I did five years ago and scrap it and start again or change the painting if I want to.'

We chatted a bit about her job at the golf course and why it is such a good fit for her and such a strong influence on her art life.

'I grew up on a farm,' she began by saying. 'I've been outdoors most of my life. My father was a farmer who grew vegetables - now I grow grass and flowers (on the golf course). I started as an assistant supervisor, which I still am. I wouldn't want my own course - too much stress. I'm really happy with my work - I love my job.'

'That's why most of my art is flowers,' she said. 'That's what I love to see.'

'What's so great about encaustic is the wax won't let me do what I think and I love that because (in my job) I am a bit of a control freak and it's very freeing for me. It gives me peace.'

The influence of art in her background is 'very subtle.'

'Dad is an amazing illustrator - he was a farmer, but we found his drawings and illustrations,' she added. 'His sister - my aunt - is a lovely painter, although she has no career to it. My mom would take us to art openings and galleries.'

With a humorous shrug, she commented, 'My brother is very analytical.'

To stay as part of the local arts community, Brown is a member of Headwaters Arts, which is how she was able to enter and be chosen to hang her art work in the gallery at Alton Mill at the Fire and Ice Festival. She looks forward to participating in the other upcoming events at the Mill.

'I love showing my paintings there,' she remarked. 'I also hang my paintings at the Granite Ridge GC. Once in a while, I organize a showing with some other artists at the club.'

There are three more shows at Alton Mill in which Brown's work will be featured and she hopes to be ready for a solo show next

year.
?I am really not political,? she commented. ?But lately, I have been so proud to be Canadian. Canadians still have that subtle elegance. My theme this year is Canada's pride.?