

dwellingings



watercolours by carol hoorn fraser

Dwellings

Watercolours by
CAROL HOORN FRASER

Edited by
Barbara Bickle and John Fraser

Published in eBook format by eBookit.com

www.eBookit.com

Copyright 2015, John Fraser
All rights reserved.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4566-2492-7

Except for reproductions or quotations in critical discussions, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from John Fraser or his estate, or from Barbara Bickle for the Afterword. Requests should be addressed to fraserj@eastlink.ca or bbickle@ns.sympatico.ca

Most of the images in *Dwellings* have appeared as artcards published by Thistle Dance Publishing (1998 – 2012). A few also appear in www.jottings.ca/carol/site.html

Cover design: John Fraser and Barbara Bickle.
Cover image: Departure of Summer, 1987, watercolour.

Communications about the contents should be addressed to
bbickle@ns.sympatico.ca
or fraserj@eastlink.ca

Dwellings is for Betty Caswell Bickle

Contents

Preface

Watercolours by Carol Hoorn Fraser

Cherry Sun
Summertime
Grosbeaks Return
White House
Evening Fever
Fading Light
Rain
Tower at Night
Summer Green
Colourful Neighbourhood
October Window I
Blue Window
Neighbourhood
Autumn Blue
Morning-Glories
Neighbourhood with Starlings
Forget-Me-Not
City Dusk
In the Gloamin'
Spring Structures
I Never Saw a Purple House
Chainlink Neighbourhood
Untitled
Suburban Windows
Moon Trellis
Garden Event
Autumn Grove

Like a House a-Fire
Somewhere In The Country

Photograph of Carol Hoorn Fraser

Afterword by Barbara Bickle

Biographical

Preface

Carol Hoorn Fraser (1930 – 1991), Wisconsin-born and Minnesota-educated, lived and made art in Nova Scotia for thirty years, with stays in Provence and Mexico. She worked with equal commitment in oils, graphics, and watercolours, but the watercolours that she produced in her last decade hold a special place in her oeuvre.

She suffered from allergies, and the five meticulously executed oils that she created in Tepoztlán in the winter of 1980-81 were increasingly stressful for her. What she did then, for the first time, was take a large sheet of glass, drip concentrated colours onto it, press sheets of drawing paper down onto them, and work the results up into images. She continued the process back home, with increasing inventiveness, as described in the Afterword. New solvents enabled her to return to oils during her last year, down in Ajijic (ah-hee-heek) on Lake Chapala. But she continued working on watercolours up until the end.

She left behind her a set of quality cibachromes of over seventy watercolours, with no indication of what she had in mind. But some kind of publication would seem likely.

A number of them have since been made available as quality artcards and on the website devoted to her. But finding the right publishers has made it possible to put together here, without print-publishing's delays, and accessibly priced, a selection displaying the full range of her treatment of one of her major themes.

Our gratitude to Joyce and Rob Stevenson, whose vision, commitment, and meticulous concern for accuracy on their Thistle Dance cards did so much for free-lance Nova Scotian artists, and enabled forty-two watercolour images, after her death, to be widely enjoyed and cherished.

And to Ineke Graham, of Studio 21, whose unflagging encouragement had kept her working on the watercolours in the knowledge that they would be exhibited and welcomed.

JF



Cherry Sun
1989
watercolour



Summertime
1987
watercolour



Grosbeaks Return
1985
watercolour



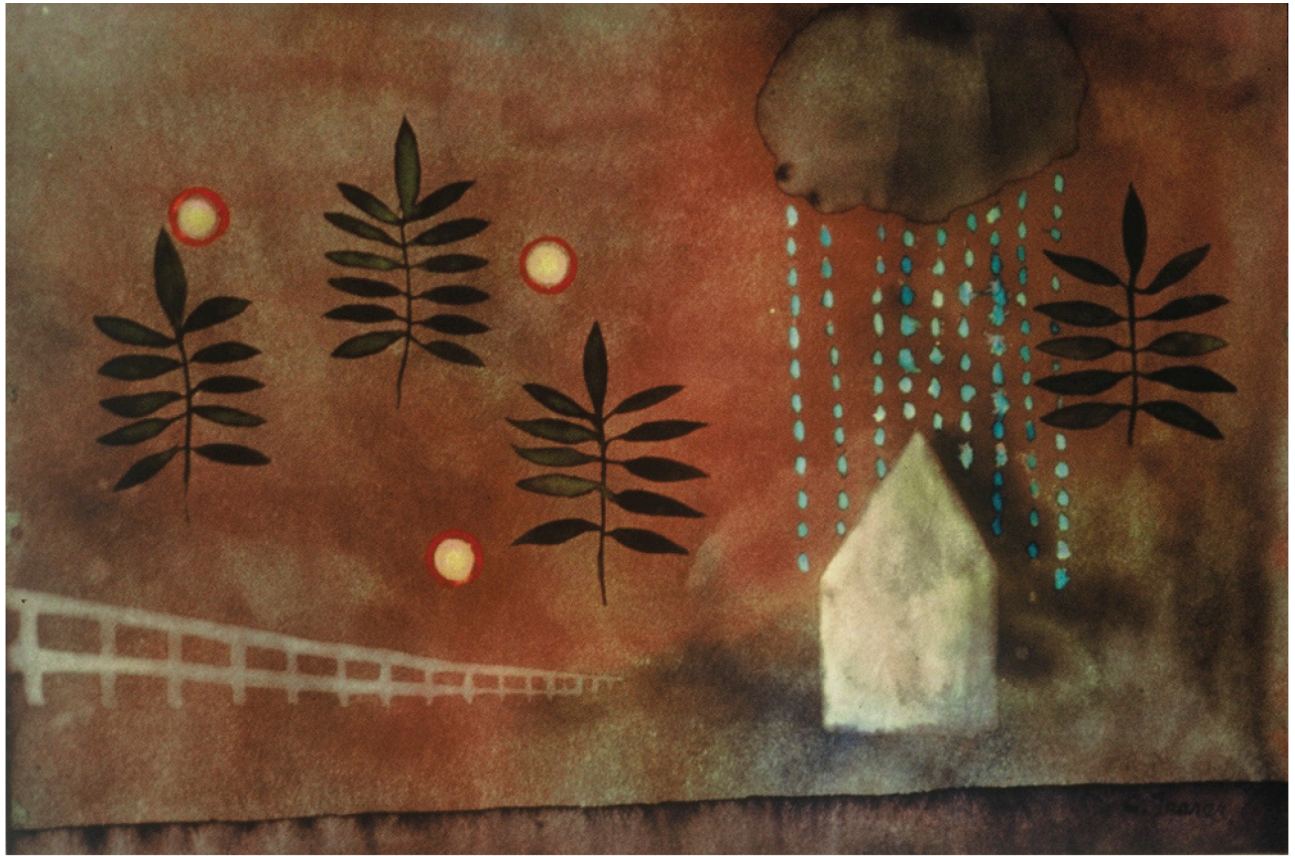
White House
1982
watercolour



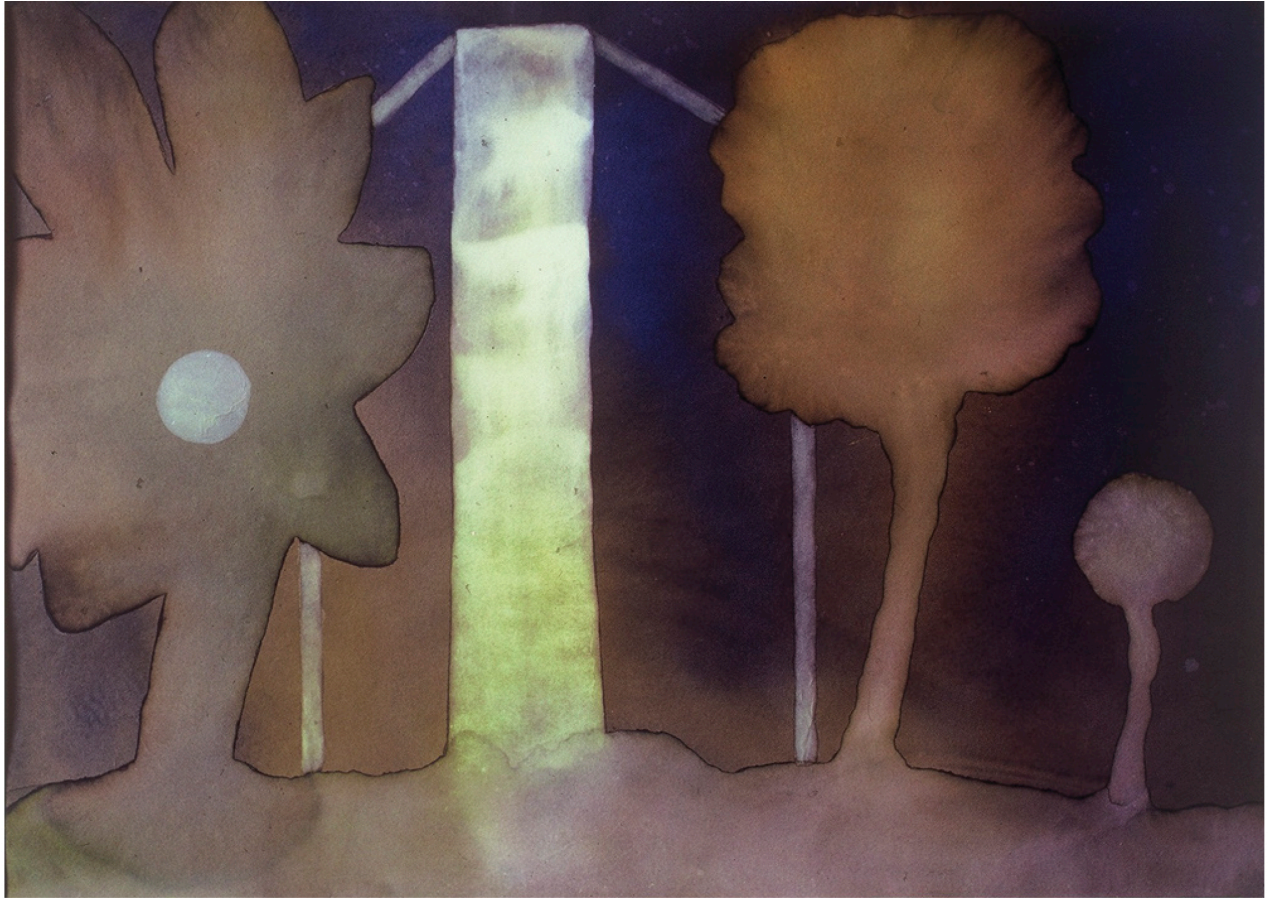
Evening Fever
1985
watercolour



Fading Light
1985
watercolour



Rain
1984
watercolour



Tower at Night
1982
watercolour



Summer Green
1985
watercolour



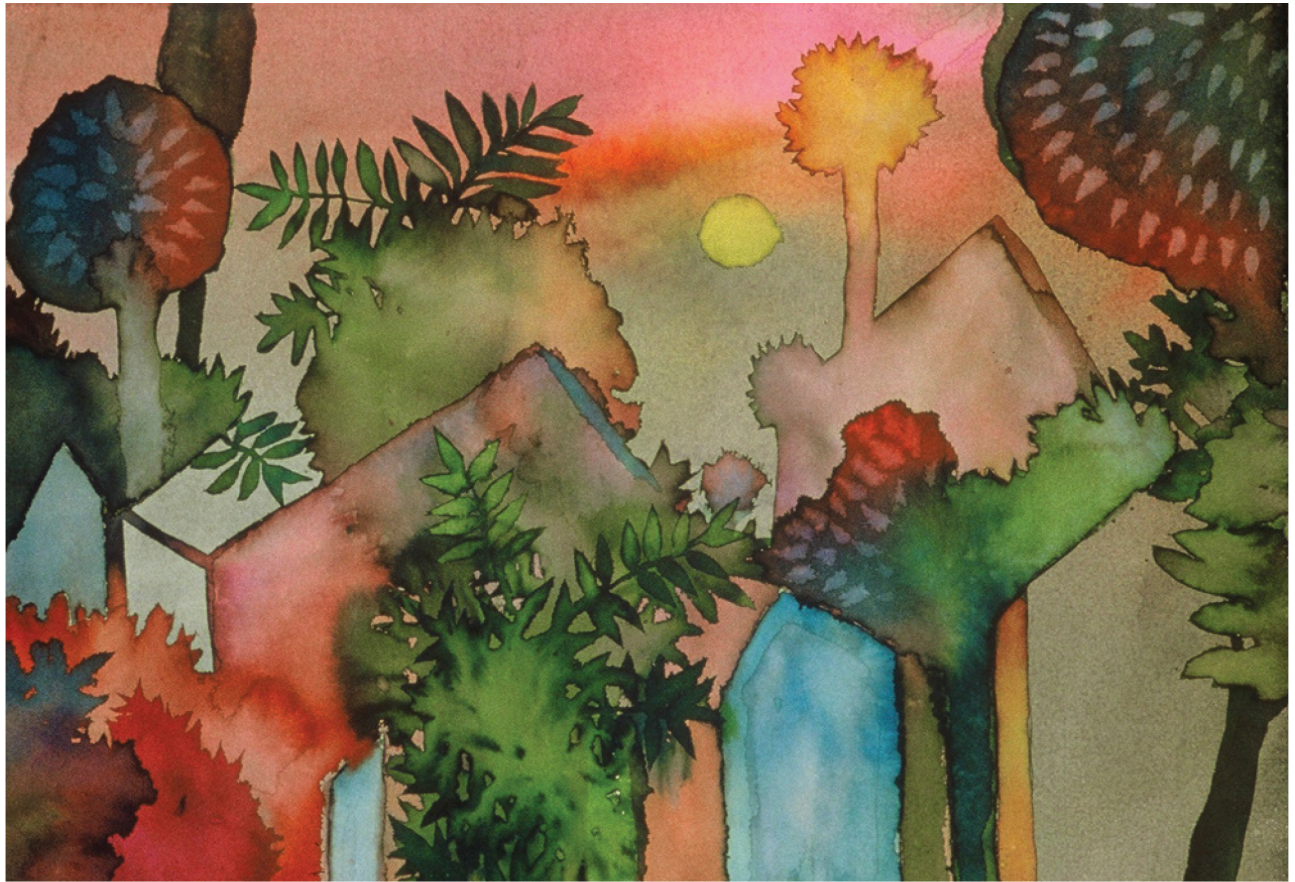
Colourful Neighbourhood
1982
watercolour



October Window I
1985
watercolour



Blue Window
1982
watercolour



Neighbourhood
1987
watercolour



Autumn Blue
1987
watercolour



Morning-Glories
[1889]
watercolour



Neighbourhood with Starlings
1982
watercolour



Forget-Me-Not
1988
watercolour



City Dusk
1988
watercolour



In the Gloamin'
1985
watercolour on rice paper



Spring Structures
1988
watercolour



I Never Saw a Purple House
1988
watercolour



Chainlink Neighbourhood
1985
watercolour



Untitled
n.d.
watercolour



Suburban Windows
1989
watercolour



Moon Trellis
1988
watercolour



Garden Event
1989
watercolour



Autumn Grove
1988
watercolour



Like a House a-Fire
[1989]
watercolour



Somewhere In The Country
1985
watercolour



Carol Hoorn Fraser
Photo: JF

Dwellings: Afterword

There are painters who transform the sun to a yellow spot, there are others who, with the help of their art and their intelligence, transform a yellow spot into sun.

(Pablo Picasso)

There's a boundary to passions when we act from feelings, but none when we are under the influence of imagination.

(Edmund Burke)

I

In the spring of 2001 mutual friends introduced me to John Fraser, a retired English professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He was searching for a graphic designer to assist, along with webmaster Rob Stevenson, in the development of a two-part website called *Jottings*: one side for his writings and one side for his wife's art—artist Carol Hoorn Fraser, who had died in 1991. Thus began an engaging nine-month collaboration. Although Carol and I had never met, the assignment led to a resonant understanding and deep appreciation of her forty years of art making. The website about her, *jottings.ca*, is packed with images and information.

Dwellings is a selection from a series of watercolour paintings that Carol created in the last decade of her life. Combining fantasy, personal motifs, symbolic iconography and visual elements drawn from her daily life, she invented mysterious and visionary cityscapes. An avid gardener, the paintings of flowers, trees, and birds, fences, ladders, and windows, tell of an exuberant kinship with her surroundings, and the various imaginative depictions are sensual and bold, displaying the scope of her interests and deep intellect. And then there is the colour!

As an undergraduate at Gustavus Adolphus College, Carol had majored in biology and chemistry, with a minor in art. Before she was accepted into the M.F.A. programme at the University of Minnesota in the 1950s, with its strong components of art-history and aesthetics, she had worked as a research chemist at Archer Daniels Midland and attended lectures in theology at the University of Göttingen.

According to Leighton Davis, Director/Curator of the Saint Mary's University gallery, she had an "ability to assimilate information and ideas from a wide variety of sources, to see relationships and make connections which she symbolized and melded into her paintings and her writing." Her paintings in oil, up into the mid-Sixties were predominantly observed landscapes, expressionist in style, accompanied by documentary watercolors and drawings. Early on she identified with Van Gogh and later with Kokoschka, temperamental painters who strove to give meaning to their experiences through symbolic imagery. Her works from the mid-Sixties on were biological and visionary representations, ably rendered in realistic form while introducing symbolic gestures to heighten the drama.

The life of the consciousness is boundless. It interpenetrates the world and is woven in all its imagery... Therefore, we must hearken closely to our inner voice.

(Oskar Kokoschka)

Married to a professor and amateur photographer, there were two summers in a Provence village and sabbaticals in Mexico. Shared intellectual and visual interests motivated new work. She interested him in Expressionism and he interested her in Surrealism. An excellent writer herself, he sought her opinions about all his writings, and she sought his opinions about works for shows. After her death he published a number of his black-and-white photos in handmade books called Throwaways, where he credits Carol, "whose informed and generous eye was always there in the old days for the darkroom harvest."

They imitate the light that is in thought,
For the mind relates to thinking as the eye
Relates to light...

(Howard Nemerov)

II

Health issues arose in the early 80s which required Carol to change painting materials from oils to watercolours. This shift allowed a more direct, loose and poetic way of painting, resulting in a range of experimentation with colour, form and semiotics. Her new-found freedom of expression enabled the exploration of the internal and external spaces found in *Dwellings*. These lyrical and dreamlike cityscapes display a full understanding of the watercolour medium.

The number of ways she employs wet on wet techniques is astounding. Often, as in “Cherry Sun” she used it to create an overall diffused effect. In “Summertime” she uses it to push light colour to form a soft edge on one evergreen, in spectacular contrast to its mate on the left. In “White House” she uses wet on wet to emphasis a set of strong verticals.

Carol’s use of “masking” is a tour-de-force. Using a liquid mask to prevent paint from seeping underneath an area she wanted to preserve, she was able to create clean edges. It allowed her to assert control within the willfulness of the medium. Again, look at “Summertime” with its panoply of more than one hundred flowers, the colour applied after each latex mask has been meticulously scratched away. Again, look at “Cherry Sun” and note the branch forms and the hard-edge blue vertical.

Among other techniques she frequently employed gouache to emphasize an overall mood or to create a contrasting mood. Likewise, with various forms of “glazing”, “layering”, “overpainting” and “negative painting.” And note

the range of colour saturation from the darks of “Evening Fever” and “In the Gloamin” to the lights of “Neighbourhood” and “Forget-Me- Not.”

Watercolours tend to flow by their own volition, running together, making unnameable colors and sometimes producing magical light.

(Carol Hoorn Fraser)

Before discussing some of the paintings in detail something must be said about Carol’s ambiguous attitude towards watercolour. According to Ian Wiseman, she once insisted that “watercolours were not *real* paintings.”

It was perhaps in that mood that she saw them as solely as functional. In an interview with Philippa Barry she remarked, “They have helped me break through the constraints of oils.” Arguably the paintings in *Dwellings* testify otherwise. They are a perfect example of D. H. Lawrence’s aphorism: “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.”

Now let us begin to analyze Carol’s wealth of visual neighbourhood cityscapes.

III

In the painting “Grosbeaks Return”, Carol has rendered a recognizable neighbourhood: three-dimensional gabled rooftop houses in close proximity, a fence, stairs, window frames, a mixture of tall trees. A subdued sun sheds its last light as darkness falls within a graded wash of sky. The strong black vertical tree on the right tempts us to shift our attention. But the temptation is halted with the discovery of seventeen Yellow Grosbeaks nestled on leafless branches. Our emotions are in constant flux from heavy to light. And what do we make of the small branchless red tree in the bottom left corner? The multiple perspectives of mood and sense bring to mind one of Carol’s favourite poets, Wallace Stevens. His blackbirds, her grosbeaks.

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.
(Wallace Stevens)

“Fading Light” turns from a recognizable neighbourhood to a landscape bursting with experimentally textured trees and various colour combinations. We see five distinct window patterns with light shining through in various colours, at least six plant and tree forms in and out of conversation with each other, a single black bird perched incongruously in one of the trees and a flock of other birds in flight. The mood of the two longest trees on the right is menacing. They echo a dread most clearly marked by the sepulchral cross in the lower right. But, as with the red tree in “Grosbeaks Return” the yellows in the arched window and the starry flowers offer solace from the dread. And the solace is accentuated by the internal life of the red tree on the left.

In “Departure of Summer” (cover painting), an impressionistic treetop and a dark brown gabled rooftop, similar to the one in “Fading Light”, form the focal point of the painting. Below the rooftop, a window reflects a landscape, not the interior of the house. The leaves are painted as one mass of orange accentuated by an autumn turquoise sky. Within the tree forms, Carol has painted individual leaves a bright golden colour. These semi-realistic patches of red and yellow again provide a solacing contrast to the ominous presence of the house in the distance. The unusual composition ambiguously represents the end of summer and celebrates the beginning of autumn.

She climbed a farther hill
More fair than show
The meadows here
Into an air more clear,
A light more still.
(Janet Lewis)

At times Carol painted impressionist simplified forms and symbols as seen in “I Never Saw A Purple House”, “Neighbourhood”, and “Colourful Neighbourhood.” Their interplay of angles, colours and shapes are playfully real.

“I Never Saw A Purple House,” is childlike in nature; striking with its few colours and lack of blended colour gradations. Two flat cream/white houses conjoin to fill the left side of the painting’s foreground with dark olive green doorways extending beyond the house into the front lawn. A flat two-storey purple-red house fills the right side background with an even longer doorway extending into the foreground to the edge of the painting. The doorway has become a long vertical path. It is painted a dark denim blue against the purple-red house and dark green lawn, mysteriously drawing attention to itself.

A red tree growing out of the conjoined houses, three green trees complementing the red/purple house and six white clouds floating evenly across the dark blue sky harmonize the composition.

“Tower at Night”, “Cherry Sun”, “Rain”, and “Moon Trellis” are lyrical compositions skillfully constructed in a simplified, dreamlike manner. Buildings and trees are flattened cut-out shapes with circles, fences and windows patterned throughout the paintings. An ephemeral quality is created by the use of wet-on-wet technique and graded washes in the sky and the house. They take the viewer outside the realm of daily experience.

In “Moon Trellis” the stage-like interior explodes in red and orange behind a yellow/orange wall. The door, stairs and window are dark in contrast to the glowing trellis and the muted light of the incongruously positioned moon. The fence in the lower left and the stars in the upper left add to the sense of dreamlike stillness. Everything awaits something, but what?

It is in the mundo of the imagination...
in which the imaginative man delights
and not in the gaunt world of reason.
(Wallace Stevens)

“Evening Fever” is a collage of multiple symbols and shapes suggesting an energized chaos without a focal point and yet the other forms and vague hints of houses somehow knit together in the mind. Carol has diminished the effect of light in this painting. A wide variety of watercolour techniques are used to experiment with foliage and to add to the crowded mass of imagery. The darkened setting is created with cool pigments, blacks and complementary colour combinations of yellow-purple and red-green. The eye travels to bright forms painted in yellow – a fence, two windows and one long chain – but as always there is the ever present red.

Energized chaos reminds us of Carol’s early connection to the abstract expressionist Jack Tworkov, whom she got to know when he was a Visiting Artist at Minnesota in 1957. “Morning-Glories” is another of Carol’s experimental paintings that may not have a focal point. Once again, symbols and reds proliferate. Both left corners are marked by strong red window shapes drawing the eye to a red vertical wall on the right and to one of her most stunning ladders and back to a surreal red window, irregularly imposed on a gabled house like those we see in many of the paintings we have looked at. This is one way of looking at “Morning- Glories.” Likely, there are twelve more, for we haven’t mentioned the repetition of the morning-glories on the right and upper left, nor the rain filled door which from another perspective may just be a focal point after all.

In the painting “Spring Structures”, houses are reduced to one-dimensional wall panels with doors, fences, windows, steps and ladders overlapping. Light and dark green branches, leaves and trees, are either simplified cut-out forms or precise in detail and are repeated in different areas. Two reddish pink patches of flowering tree tops delicately compliment the mostly green setting. Within an oversized door frame, in the foreground’s large white/green house, is a distant landscape. The customary white peaked house is encircled by a palette of blues and greens. The combination of blue, green and white houses blending within squares, angles and triangular shapes transform the neighbourhood into one harmonious pattern.

Carol continues these symbolic paintings with “City Dusk”, “Garden Event” and “Forget-Me-Not” adding dense gardens, chained fences and radiant reds.

“Forget-Me-Not” is a peaceful painting. It announces the arrival of spring with a multitude of vernal colouring. It displays the family of forms employed throughout the series in full force: a massive bed of blue forget-me-nots broken by gold leopard’s bane and five red tulips; a familiar ladder, fence and chainlink placed in a triangular pattern; a triangular green roof matching a patch of green landscape beyond the white fence. Magritte-like imaginary spaces and de Chirico-like steps allude to the surreal. And a new element is present – what appears to be a wedding band.

One by one objects are defined—
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf.
(William Carlos Williams)

“Chainlink Neighbourhood”, and “Autumn Grove” are compelling garden vistas, dissimilar in colour, mood, and motifs but forceful in expressing Carol’s ability to meld nature and man-made environments. Various patterns

move the viewer's eye round the painting, back and forth from detail to detail.

The measured blood beats out the year's delay.
The tearless eyes and heart, forbidden grief,
Watch the burned, restless, but abiding leaf,
The brighter branches arming the bright day.
(Louise Bogan)

The title "Chainlink Neighbourhood" marks an ambivalence towards close-knit, stable communities. The simplified triangular houses are lightly coloured, mostly white, contrasted by earthy dark red and green leafy trees. Fencing of various sizes and colours is positioned throughout the painting, producing a chain effect outside and inside the houses. A white bird, a curious, lyrical cluster of pink flowers, and a patch of white picket fence suggest harmony and communion, but the pattern of chainlink undercuts this impression, a discordance accentuated by a blood-red mass of colour which in turn is relieved by the lively formed red branches against a greenish gabled house on the left.

"Autumn Grove" is ablaze with reds and yellows in an exciting, almost excessive, compositional assemblage; three windows suspended in the air, two ladders floating above the ground, nine or ten trees of varying dimensions, a large chainlink crisscross in the foreground, an incongruous arrow on the right pointing inward, a blue/black elongated house echoing the arrow with various red and green leaves intermingled throughout, what might be a grid of four or more vertical panels. All of this and more – the sparse branches in the window on the left contrasted to the luminous white leaves in the window on the right, and then the delicate sprig of yellow.

Now is the time for mirth,
Nor cheek or tongue be dumb;
For with the flowery earth
The golden pomp is come.
(Robert Herrick)

“Like A House A-Fire” is as pictorially rich as “Autumn Grove” but insists more on interpretation of its symbols. The ladders in “Autumn Grove” are primarily decorative, the houses are structurally sturdy and are part of a vertical pattern. In “Like A House A-Fire” the ladders are being consumed by fire and the houses are disintegrating. Dwellings are not always benign markers of security and stability. Ladders don’t always lead somewhere. But to interpret the painting in this way entails the risk of underestimating its beauty.

In an interview, Carol revealed she obviously thought about such things: “A ladder gives the idea of climbing or aspiring;... [all symbols] mean something in their own context but I get very self-conscious about repeating them. I just want a kind of repertoire to give a generalized meaning... I ask only that the viewer look, explore, and discover something of meaning to him.”

Perhaps the most mysterious of all the paintings in *Dwellings* is “Somewhere In The Country.” It skillfully combines many watercolour techniques with a composition that is almost diptych in nature. A carefully delineated white house with its crown of vermillion leaves is a strong focal point on the left, whereas on the right our eye moves from ladder to ladder and house to house eventually pulled upward to the cloud in the upper right corner. A long ladder (or is it a path?) on the left side is repeated seven times on the right side. The full vermillion crown on the house becomes a dark cropped mass that crowns the hill. The burnt umbers above the vermillion are repeated on the hillside. Likewise, the modulated greens in front of the house are repeated in darker hues in the valley below.

One gabled house on the left, fifteen on the right but are they all houses or marks of our finitude?

VI

Carol's premature death back home ended her ambitious return to oils (her first love) during her final stay in Mexico, down beside Lake Chapala.

Allergies and her fidelity to her own vision had complicated her career. But watercolours like those sampled here in *Dwellings* had won her a new and admiring audience. The dark patches are eclipsed by an overriding sense of fulfillment, reconciliation and joy. Taken together these watercolours can be read as Carol's final meditation on her physical life in Halifax and her intellectual and spiritual life in the world – a world of loving abidance in gardens, flowers, trees, and dwellings.

© Barbara Bickle 2015

bbickle@ns.sympatico.ca

Scott MacDougall's guidance and discernment in the writing of Afterword is gratefully acknowledged.

Biographical

Carol Hoorn Fraser, (1930 – 1991), RCA, grew up in Superior, Wisconsin, and obtained an MFA at the University of Minnesota, where she studied under art historian Lorenz Eitner, aesthetician John Hospers, and poet Allen Tate, among others, wrote her thesis on “The Human Image in Contemporary Painting,” and took top awards in major shows at the Walker Art Center and the Minneapolis Institute of Art. In 1961 she moved with her husband John to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where she lived until her death, with stays in Provence and Mexico. Her works are in the Walker Art Center, the Smithsonian Institute, the National Gallery of Canada, the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, and other public galleries.

Barbara Bickle, (1947 –), BFA, was born in Toronto, Ontario, where she attended the Central Technical School of Art. In 1980 she moved to Halifax to study art history, drawing and painting at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. A postgraduate diploma in computer graphics and interactive multimedia at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario, led to careers in fine art and web design. She has produced a booklet of her life as an artist: *The Book of Jobs – how an artist survived in Canada*.

John Fraser, (1928 –), PhD, FRSC, grew up in North London and has degrees from Oxford (Balliol) and the University of Minnesota, with a minor in Philosophy. For thirty years he taught English at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. His three print books were published by Cambridge University Press. His large website, *jottings.ca*, includes a book-length presentation of Carol’s life and works and the anthology *A New Book of Verse*, and he is the author of several eBooks.