

En route to Sylvain Louis-Seize's sprawling hilltop home outside of Campbellville, Ontario, we drive through the glittering, ice-encrusted countryside talking about endurance. A rugged individualist, Louis-Seize likes testing himself against the elements. A city kid who grew up in the Plateau area in downtown Montreal, he has fond memories of winter camping with his cousin on his uncle's farm. Linking holing up in the snow with his experience of painting he says, "Nature is the survival of the fittest and there has to be a struggle in art as well. You have to show the struggle."

"The ability to adapt is the greatest quality of a human being," the artist asserts. His parents separated when he was very young, he was raised by his mother and they moved around a lot in Montreal. Poor growing up, he was of necessity a bricoleur who excelled at making things from found materials. The antediluvian light in his paintings may possibly be traced to his formative childhood experience of creating a Crustacean-era diorama complete with a parade of plasticine dinosaurs that was so compelling that children in other grades filed into to his classroom to view it. When he was twelve, he scavenged Styrofoam slabs to build a glider that was so large that the wind picked him up when he ran with it.

These earlier stabs at creative expression led to abortive exercises with paint and colour, experiments which the self-taught artist began to pursue more seriously in his early thirties. In Montreal he met his wife Vicky, and at that point he was working by day in construction and painting large oil and acrylic canvases at night. Following Vicky to Toronto in 2001 at a time when the art market was booming, led to breakthrough exhibitions and sales for Sylvain. Seven years later, life and art have consolidated. In the past few months the couple moved into their spacious home and studio in the country and gave birth to their firstborn son.

There's a tension in Sylvain Louis-Seize's paintings between the sky-bound, splendour of nature and the pensive contemplation implied in his generally somber palette and darkened foregrounds. There's a sense that we humans see things through "a glass darkly," a 'glass' whose surface is clouded by heedless pollution of the environment. Consider one of his elegiac landscapes bathed in antique, diffused light: In the bile-coloured sky there's a hint of impending precipitation. It's the magic hour before dusk in this evocation of elysian solitude. Veiled hillocks and gullies exhale dew. Trees shift with vitality. Free of human presence, a shadowy field is spangled by an uncannily brilliant ribbon of water.

Louis-Seize's work has the initial look of a Romantic-style oil painting browned with age and candle smoke, but it also bears the drips, scrapings and scarifications that signal an ambivalence about beauty that is a defining characteristic of artists of his generation. "There's a struggle between darkness and light when I paint," Sylvain Louis-Seize explains. Segueing from the metaphysical to the physiological, he then alludes to art guru Hans Hoffman's dictum about visual tension in abstraction, "It's a push-pull thing." A physical person, he brings the analogy down to his own life experience, likening the process of painting to Latin dance: "My materials are my partners," he observes, swaying to an imagined beat, "and sometimes they lead."

Avowedly unconcerned with symbols, water nonetheless resonates for him. "I am aiming for an essence when I show a river that has no beginning and no end," he says. While the art-historical trope of the sublime (a swooning sensation of awe when confronted by spectacular works of man or nature) is not one that Louis-Seize consciously espouses, he does want his paintings to churn up "deep primal associations that you don't experience every day." He treasures moments of transcendence such as those he experienced touring the Perigord region of Southern France, the serre hills of Spain, and the intense azure high-altitude skies of Western Canada. Most especially he recollects the stunning vistas of the Napa Valley and the time he rounded a tight California curve only to be enveloped in fog magically diffused with light originating from he knew not where. "Although there was light coming in, you couldn't tell if it was night or day," he recalls. Pursuing the memory further he adds, "I want my painting to be like that, challenging, even contradictory, something that inspires a certain uneasiness."

At an auspicious juncture in his career, with a number of exhibitions looming, the artist waxes lyrical. Gazing out the window at the steep ravine beyond, Louis-Seize is temporarily transported back to that watercourse saying, "Sometimes I see myself at the beginning of the river, sometimes at the end." Then, the front door is flung open and in a flurry of cold air and baby paraphernalia, his wife and son enter. The artist's joy is palpable as he mentally steps back onto dry land.

texte By Betty Ann Jordan