



How
one
painter
looked
out the
window
and
found
her
muse

By Alex Newman Photography Edward Pond

LAKE EFFECT

IT'S A PICTURE

postcard summer day in Southern Ontario. The string of GTA suburbs recedes as farms take their place on either side of the road, interrupted by the occasional drumlin formation so common near Rice Lake. The terrain rolls a little, creating curves and jags in the tight grid of concession roads—that remnant of Ontario's 19th-century colonial past.

There's no sign at the fork of the road leading to Rebecca Last's cottage, only a row of battered and weirdly painted mailboxes. The road turns to gravel and climbs the hill around the southeast shore of the lake, whose shimmer is intermittently visible between thickets of pine, spruce, and birch. The road is so narrow there's barely room for two cars to pass, and parking is smack against the eroded hillside.

A steep, curving path of stone steps leads down to the vast deck that connects Last's cottage and her studio cabin. And that's when you can really see it—the million-dollar view that prompted Last and her husband, Ernest Cholakis, to put in an offer one freezing December night 14 years ago.

Now framed by two 60-foot-tall pines, that view was so magnificent the couple overlooked crumbling steps, overgrown gardens, listing floors, uneven decking, leaking windows and roof, and tacky ceiling tiles. Because, as Cholakis puts it, “a house you can change. A view you can't.”

It was a view that completely altered the direction of Last's artistic life. »

Artist Rebecca Last seldom leaves the cottage while she's working, except to pick up groceries. Her studio cabin houses shelves of painting supplies and displays her artwork for local tours. Previous pages: On the main deck off the sunroom, Last holds *Studies in Light & Energy No.7*, an early work from 2004.



THE VIEW COMPLETELY CHANGED LAST'S LIFE AS AN ARTIST



The studio, which contains a loft area and a cedar-lined bathroom and shower, is connected to the main cottage via an extensive deck. Like all keen cottagers, Last and husband Ernest Cholakis entertain in the summer: small evening dinner parties and an annual large gathering of 20.

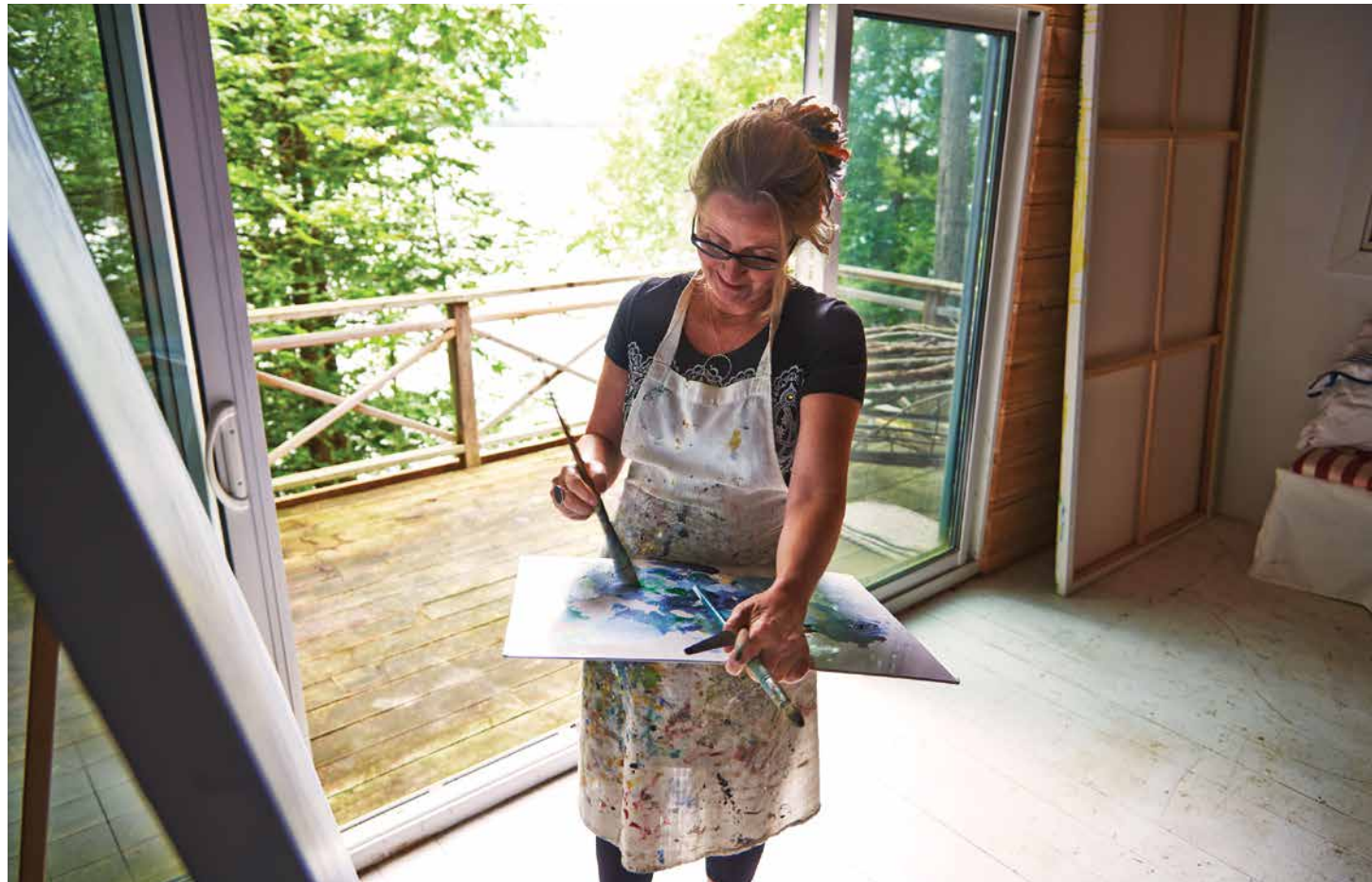
When the couple took possession in winter 2002, Last was exhausted from the demands of her interior design practice, her work as a guide for art tours in Italy, and her commissioned paintings. All she wanted to do was sit in the silence. “Even in that derelict state,” she says, “the cottage was a place of peace.”

The painter had one commission to complete, however, a painting of Tuscany—a piece so huge that she and Cholakis had to clear the largest room in the cottage just to hang the canvas. And as she worked, her eye wandered from the lush Italian scene emerging on her canvas to the bleak winter scene unfolding outside her window.

“I suddenly realized what I really wanted to do was right under my nose here in Canada. My roots are here. This is my landscape and my home, and it was time to get into it.”

Once the Tuscany commission was done, she started working immediately with that view. It now shapes everything she paints. Even after 13 years, Last finds that the deeper she explores the effects of the lake’s changing weather on sky, land, and water, the deeper she understands nature’s quixotic energy and her own artistic capabilities. It serves to remind her that, as she says, “nature is not benign, and we are not its master.” Her painting *Through Silence* was featured in a 2014 United Nations report on climate change, and she recently exhibited at The Painting Center in Chelsea, N.Y., at a show on changing climates, *Shifting Ecologies*.

“Being immersed in one thing like Rice Lake, rather than running around looking for new subjects, allows you to sink into the work and the landscape. All that doesn’t matter falls away, and the essence remains,” she says. “The cottage has given me the ability to work to



“EACH OF US HAS ONE PLACE THAT SHAPES US AND OUR LIVES”

depths of vision and metaphor that just wouldn't be possible with a variety of subjects and places.”

While at the cottage, Last paints continuously. Away from the cottage—at her Toronto studio, or elsewhere, when acting as an artist-in-residence—she works in response to that view, painting from memory. Last isn't the first painter to repeat a scene; Monet completed a series of 30-plus works of the Rouen Cathedral in 1892-93 in order to capture how changing light can significantly alter the experience of a subject.

Staying with one view has also matured Last's work, according to her friend freelance curator Kelly McCray. “The painter's evolution from earlier, more literal representations to fierce turbulent chaotic swings of nature offer viewers a rare portrait of a land whose every shift in mood and temperament are captured with the deft handling of the brush,” he wrote about her exhibit *Edge of Chaos, The Paintings of Rebecca Last*.

For Last, it's all about a sense of place: “Each of us has one place that takes precedence in our unconscious and even shapes us and our life experience.”

She grew up in a creative home environment in Point Edward near Lake Huron, a lake known for its moodiness and sudden storms. Both her mother and grandmother paint. After university—with degrees partially completed in Italy—Last lived entirely off her art, as a painter and a home designer, and by leading educational art tours. She's lived in many places, as an artist-in-residence at The Banff Centre and at The Hambridge Center in Georgia, and as a fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

While all of Last's paintings are rooted on Rice Lake, no two are alike. In the summer of 2004, {Continued on page 119}

Previous pages:
Sometimes Last paints outside on the deck of her studio. Works such as *Deluge* hang above the fire-place in the main cottage, but “they're temporary and come and go.” She says that the combined kitchen-living area is “casual and conducive to company” (this page).



Blipp Rebecca Last in the photo above to see a gallery of her paintings

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she awoke in the middle of the night to see a red sky across the lake. The extreme flooding in Peterborough, 50 km away, had everyone up with the lights on. “It was curious,” Last says. “We normally see nothing from Peterborough, but that night, for some reason, the city lights reflected off the lower edge of cloud over the lake, making the sky a blaze of red. It was very eerie—we’re not close enough to the city to see those lights.” What Last painted of that experience was a glowing red orb of sky over a red reflection on the water.

Triple Narratives, on the other hand, has a coolness that Last equates to being next to water when the warmth of summer has ended. “It’s created out of a long series of layering, to build a surface that emulates the movement of the surface of the water, comprised of colours and paint strokes meant to move the viewer with feelings of this imaginary place.”

Last describes *Sound without Words* as having “the familiar elements of land

and water reflections playing off surrealist colours of cadmiums, purples, blues, and reds in patterns on the surface that feel like the arresting bursts of colours one might experience at end of day.”

Last’s paintings are energetic, even muscular and wild, in contrast to her careful, almost deliberate personal appearance. In the many years I’ve known her, I’ve only seen her in sync with her environment. As a young woman living in an apartment overlooking the Don Valley in Toronto, she painted her living room walls as a *trompe l’oeil* of Tuscany and she carried herself much like you’d imagine a Florentine art student. Once we met in a café and Last arrived looking chic and elegant—hair swept up, statement earrings dangling, wearing her grandmother’s cape-style jacket that looked like a new Holt Renfrew creation. At the cottage, she wears a black skort with a Mondrianesque sleeveless top, hair casually pulled back, yet the tray of drinks she has prepared is perfect—hand-squeezed lemonade in an exquisite cut-glass vintage pitcher and matching glasses.

Last has a knack for becoming one with her background, in what seems like a deliberate act of self-editing, creating a specific scene. But she’s also an observer, and then a translator, of her surroundings. As we sit in front of the cottage, shaded by an umbrella and listening to the water, it occurs to me that Last is not unlike the pioneer women who settled near Rice Lake and whom she admired, particularly Catharine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie, middle-class sisters from England plunked in the middle of the Ontario bush, who famously wrote about their experiences.

She never starts a painting with an end result in mind, but Last does have a process; it takes months, even years to complete. “As soon as you put a mark down on a canvas, you’ve created a challenge, and it needs another mark to resolve it. And that next mark creates yet another challenge, and so I put another mark down. With a finished work, you are basically looking at a resolved line of mark making. It’s an abstract notion, but that’s how I develop the image.” »

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It's an apt way to describe her process for renovating the cottage as well—pulling away all that was ugly, paring it down to a nearly blank canvas, then carefully layering up the elements by putting down one mark and resolving it with the next.

"Friends would ask me what part of the house we were working on," Last recalls, "but that was really hard to answer because it wasn't systematic. I had a picture in mind, but getting there involved both long-term planning and spur-of-the-moment choices. There was so much ugliness that for a while all we did was take away what didn't belong."

There's always something to learn in the process of creation, whether it's from a painting or a renovation. "The point is you go somewhere new because you need to develop richer layers, and you take risks. A painting can be almost finished and I will throw something else at it, and all of a sudden the work is opened up again and there's a new challenge. In the end, it's about resolving challenges and

letting yourself be challenged. If you allow yourself to go into those places, you get into richer territory, and it's those richer layers that resonate most with people looking at your work."

Last approaches interior design the same way and, though she does not currently take on design clients, it's how she tackled the cottage's interior. "I look at the design of the cottage in relation to the landscape and in terms of colour, texture, line, and perspective. Compositionally, I think in terms of multiple sightlines through each room that use the interior layout and colour to direct the eye towards exterior focal points."

She carried that same method outside. Each year the couple has cut a few more trees to provide unimpeded views of the lake from every space within the cottage. "We took our time in that editing process," says Last. "It's not something you can rush because trees take decades to grow back."

All the work—13 years of painstakingly replacing the ugly bits with beautiful, functioning elements—can reduce the cottage experience to a task. "It's

hard to know when to stop," Last says. "This place is a source of rejuvenation as well, so we have to be careful not to make it only associated with work."

Last also knows when to set aside her role as documenter of the world she observes in Rice Lake, and when to become immersed in it. So when she's not in her studio, she can be found on the dock with Cholakis, watching as storms approach from the west, with their lashing rain and wind that whips the waves into action. Or she's in the kayak, observing the wildlife—muskrats, ospreys, turtles, hawks, wild turkeys, bald eagles, kingfishers, and loons—that comes for the reedy waters of Rice Lake.

When I ask if she will ever grow tired of painting the same view, Last says, "Never. It never stops changing. I have never observed the same scene twice. If you combine all the elements—sky, water, land—the variables are endless. One can conjure a universe from that view." 🐾

Alex Newman is a Toronto writer and editor who fantasizes about living and working in a cottage like Rebecca Last's.



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