



Carina Francioso's water paintings are so realistic, she appears to be lying on the beach when really she's posing at home in front of her artwork.

Patiently riding the waves

In her hyper-realistic oil paintings, Carina Francioso captures crashing surfs and sun-kissed swells — and inspires memories in homes around the world

BY KATHRYN STORRING
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISHA TOWNSEND

The immense oil paintings feature water — no beach, no shoreline, no intrusive boats. Just water. The images are photo-realistic, but there's much more at play. Small, painstaking brushstrokes coax motion from the waves, a shimmer from the highlights and spray from the frothy bubbles rising from unseen forces. The watery hues build and recede, luring the imagination into unknown depths.

At their heart, these paintings are also about geography, and artist Carina Francioso has the photos to prove it. “Remembering Kā’anapali,” for example, which hangs in her Cambridge studio, is based on photos taken during a trip to Maui. “Sea of the Soul” (“Il Mare dell’anima”), the first in

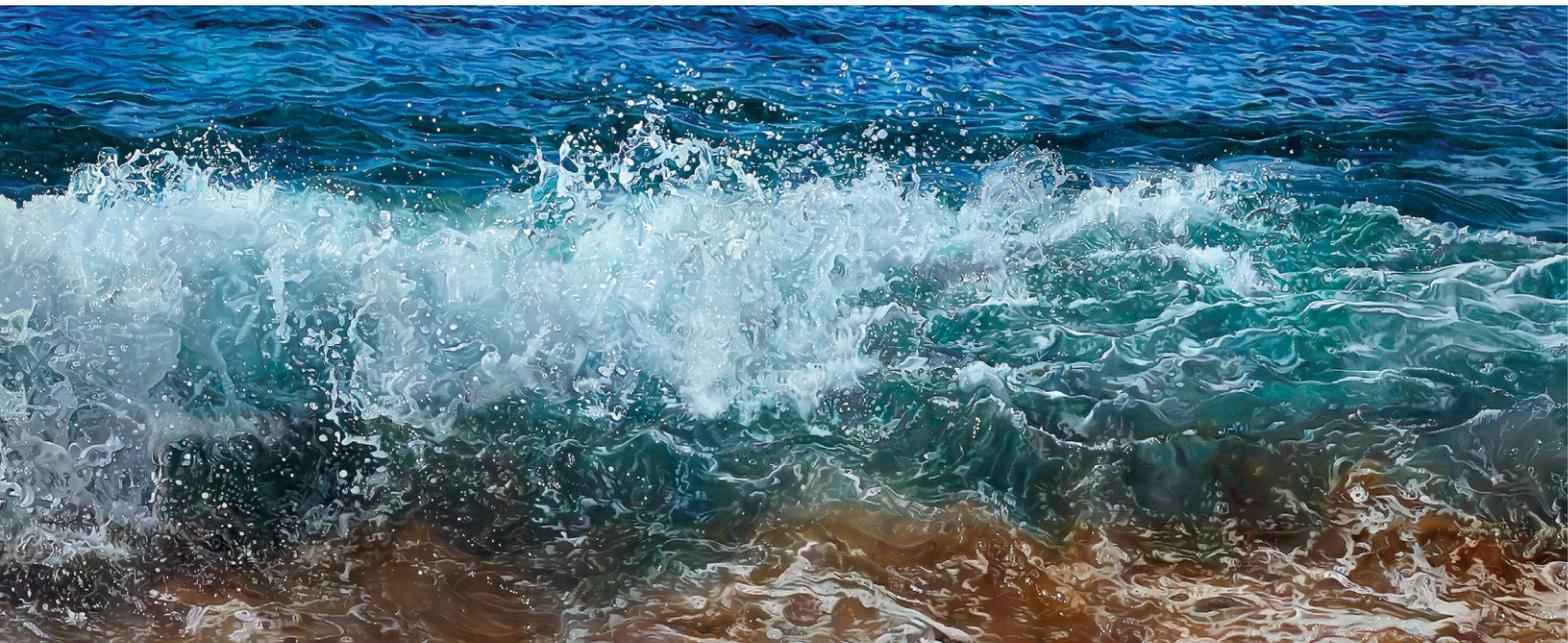
the water series, was sourced from Gallipoli, Italy, a coastal town in the region where she has spent many happy summers connecting with her Italian roots.

Still, Francioso, 29, invites viewers to apply their own geography to her paintings. Maybe the waves evoke memories of lazy summers at a cottage or of a special place shared with a special person. Water is, after all, a universal subject.

“Water is life. We wouldn’t be here without it,” she says. “(There is) the connection to nature — how everything is linked together, how everything is this tapestry.”

Water has captivated Francioso’s artistic energy since 2015. Earlier projects and commissions have ranged from surreal imagery to portraits to explorations of culture and fashion.

She completed her honours degree in fine



'Remembering Kā'anapali,' oil on canvas, 25" x 68"



'The Sea of the Soul,' oil on canvas, 36" x 48"

arts at the University of Waterloo in 2010 and has earned various awards. Her list of solo and group exhibitions includes this past November's curated show called Out of the BOX Meet Art\$Pay, held at Kitchener's Walper Hotel.

Her art has found its way into homes from Vancouver to Portugal and Croatia. Amsterdam daredevil Wim Hof, known as the Iceman for his ability to withstand extreme cold, has one of her works; American musician John Legend accepted a tribute portrait before a concert at Centre in the Square (and invited Francioso to join a small group of VIPs onstage).

Currently she is finishing a tribute portrait as a gift for Jamie Foxx, a symbol of her admiration, gratitude and respect for the actor.

In an interview, such accomplishments are mentioned in passing. More often, the conversation slips into life journeys and personal ideologies. She's thoughtful and serene, perhaps the result of another passion, yoga, which helps centre her thoughts after her workout at the start of her work day.

"I think routines are really important," she explains. "If you can set the day right, the rest of the day is yours."

Francioso first tried yoga at the suggestion of a friend during a period of uncertainty a few months after her 2010 graduation. She spent that summer in Italy, helping to care for her "nonna," her father's mother. After her grandmother's death, she returned to Canada, and then her mother's father passed away.

"There was a lot of sadness there and a lot of confusion around me and what I wanted to do with my life," she recalls.

That first yoga class left her in tears. "But good tears," she hastens to add, "in the sense that I was releasing all of this heaviness and confusion that I was going through at the time."

By the end of 2011, she had trained as a yoga instructor. Although she stopped teaching in 2016, the yoga and meditation techniques still inspire her.

"If you do anything as a meditation, which is really just being in the moment — being in the present — then your experiences in life become richer," she says.

This certainly applies to her art-making, an immersive experience deepened by listening to music or self-development audios.

"Sometimes I will be painting for five or six hours and then get up and think, whoa, where did the time go? I am just so lost in it."

But she points out any activity can become a meditative pause in our fast-paced world — even walking.

"Yoga is really a way of life," she says. "It's the way you breathe, it's the way you interact with people. It's the way you live your everyday life."

Indeed, Francioso's everyday life seems steeped in intentional living and the creative process. Her parents, Judy and Aldo, welcomed her back home in 2014 so she could pursue art full time in their spacious house tucked into a wooded area near Blair. Her second-storey studio



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wraps around the top of a staircase. A huge window bathes the space in natural light.

At the base of the stairs, just off the home's entranceway, a piano awaits. Francioso has 13 years of Royal Conservatory training, and she sometimes feeds her muse at the keyboard. Beyond is the living room, which doubles as a gallery for some of her paintings.

But a description of her beautiful surroundings risks undermining the concentrated work that takes place in her home studio. A large painting can take six months as Francioso builds her vision one square inch at a time. She paints five to 10 hours most days and on and off on weekends.

And her parents' support goes beyond parent-daughter devotion. It also honours the artistic talent that runs through her mother's side of the family. Judy Francioso designed their home and is an accomplished sculptor. Carina's grandfather was a furniture designer and his sister, a painter. Both of their parents — Carina's great-grandparents — were sculptors.

Art might be in the genes, but it is also in the heart.

"You get to share a part of you that is different from what everybody else is sharing. It's unique and I think it's able to touch people on a different level," Francioso says.

Carina Francioso's art is a reflection of who she is as a person, says Doug Kirton, a former teacher at the University of Waterloo. 'She is very calm, thoughtful, contemplative.'

"I like to encourage and inspire people to do that in any job that they have. Can you make it unique and creative and a little bit different so that it might inspire somebody else?"

Of course, such ideas are not always an easy sell in an age when everything happens in the flick of a finger. She worries millennials, in particular, are more prone to a life of impatience.

"To create something beautiful takes time," she says. "And we really, really need to recognize that because we are losing that essence of taking the time to create something," whether in the arts or in the workplace.

"My art has always taught me patience because of the details, because of the time that it takes to finish a piece, especially the larger ones. It's about being present with every moment and building the bricks slowly. You are not going to have a house in a second, you have to build the bricks slowly and watch it come together."

Some of the bricks that enrich Francioso's life have been collected beyond the world of art.

For one thing, she has been a model, starting with training at Expressions by DSK in Cambridge when she was a child.

Her modelling gigs are sporadic these days, but she did appear in an online video for New Balance shoes. She also landed a job with Contiki after her brother noticed a call for models while on a trip with the travel company. She was hired for a series of photoshoots in Miami, New Orleans, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. Not only were her expenses covered, but Contiki also offered a free trip. She chose Thailand.

Volunteer experiences have also involved

travel. As part of a support crew for celebrated author, life coach and philanthropist Tony Robbins, she visited Los Angeles, San Jose and Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Although there was no pay, she met "amazing people" and found time to explore and take photos.

And then there's Italy.

Since age 16, she has spent many summers at a family home and beach house in the "heel" section of the country. The trips not only connected her with her grandmother and extended family, but they also honed her artistic tendencies with easy access to spectacular art and architecture in Italy and other parts of Europe.

As a bonus, the visits polished her language skills. She studied Italian while at the University of Waterloo, but she was already so fluent by second year that she also taught labs and tutored.

In 2015, she illustrated and translated a book of Italian poetry, "Frammenti di Luce" ("Fragments of Light"), by Anna Ciardullo Villapiana.

The Italian trips even nourish her social side. Inspired by the fresh foods and delicious recipes, she returns to Cambridge eager to cook and entertain.

"That's the thing about art," she notes. "You are in the studio; it's a very intimate thing. You're spending a lot of time with yourself and your own thoughts. Yet I have this other side that is so social and so interested in other people's lives and what inspires them. I guess I am an introvert-extrovert."

Both sides have their place.

"I like to be around people, but I know that if I don't spend enough time with myself, I don't want to be around people. There has to be that healthy balance."

That day in 2015 when Francioso first experimented with water photos was like an awakening. She realized this potential theme "had always been there, right in front of me," but she just hadn't thought of it as part of her art practice.

The water photos not only captured the

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Carina Francioso met musician John Legend in 2014 when he accepted her tribute painting, 'I'm not afraid to fly' (oil on canvas 20" x 30"), before his concert at Kitchener's Centre in the Square.

sea surrounding her Italian roots, but they brought back childhood memories of boating on Georgian Bay. And they also stirred something deeper — concerns about water conservation.

She says she could have produced art that would underline the problems facing waterways — pollution, for example. But she chose a positive platform instead. “I want to focus on the beauty because what we focus on is where energy flows.”

Doug Kirton, chair of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Waterloo, believes these “remarkable” paintings are an ideal direction for Francioso.

“They really reflect my sense of her being,” he notes in an interview. “She is very calm, thoughtful, contemplative. She just seems to understand herself very well.”

He points out a similar description could be applied to her art.

Kirton, who taught Francioso’s studio specialization course, says throughout her time at Waterloo, the young artist’s observational and technical skills showed a sophistication beyond her years. Both gifts play out in the meticulous attention to detail in the water series.



“Technically, it suits her because of the way in which she paints,” Kirton says. “Not many of us would have the patience and the focus and the mindfulness for that kind of a process. I certainly don’t.”

The water theme is open to multiple interpretations depending on the viewer’s experience, he says.

“Water is an archetype,” he notes. “It’s common to mythology, across cultures, religion. It’s just a very rich, associative subject.”

Francioso says she will move to her own studio at some point, especially as her large pieces of art become too much for her home space. She might also get back to a blog project in which she interviewed artists in Toronto.

She looks forward to solo shows in supportive galleries. Such shows would exhibit her art, of course, but they could also play into her idealistic side.

“I love bringing people together from all walks of life — young, old, hippy, fashionable, from every world you can think of,” Francioso says. “I think that is what the world needs more of because we get so caught up in these little niches, like I only hang out with these people or I only socialize with these people.”

“I just love seeing all walks of life together in one room.”

But then again, she knows that sometimes life unfolds by its own set of rules.

“I think sometimes a path chooses you,” she says. “Will this path last forever for me? Well, who knows? I hope that it flourishes. I have a dream of selling my work all over the world. But who knows what will happen?” 

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