

Painting outside traditional lines

Celebrated local artist Nancy Peng also a popular instructor at Button Factory Arts





“She uses so many different techniques, East Asian and western, and puts them together.”

FAITH HIEBLINGER, CURATOR
HOMER WATSON HOUSE AND GALLERY



“MOONLIGHT MEANDERING” watercolour, ink and linocut

BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM
PHOTOGRAPHY • ALISHA TOWNSEND

On a rainy Tuesday afternoon, artist Nancy Peng urges her watercolour painting students at Button Factory Arts to paint snow and sky in a new way.

“The traditional way is a wash,” Peng tells the group standing around her desk. “I don’t start with a wash. I start with underpainting.” The first layer or underpainting is often light and subsequent layers build up the painting, she says.

“I switch my colours up and they’re not realistic colours, but it still reads as snow,” she says, quickly moving her brush from her palette to paint a snow-laden tree.

“Use your imagination and whatever colours you want. The concept is that to make something white, you use contrast.”

Peng’s students, ranging in age from 24 to 90, peer at photographs of trees, snow and clouds and get down to work.

“She lets us go fearlessly and encourages us to be fearless,” says Sue Watt, a retired teacher who is one of about half a dozen students diving into the painting exercise. “Her favourite phrase is ‘Let’s try it.’”

Leaning over a desk, Peng offers encouragement to student Doreen Brisbin, who is frustrated with her attempts to paint clouds in the way that Peng suggests. Brisbin, 90, says it’s not the way she learned to do it a long time ago.

“Try not to be controlled,” Peng advises. “The more variation you get, the more natural it is.”

“She’s very patient and she’s got a sense of humour,” says Brisbin, a retired University of Waterloo chemistry professor who



"THE GRAND WATERSHED" watercolour, lino and ink, 30x22, on wood panel

received her PhD in 1960, an "unheard-of" accomplishment for a woman then.

"She's terrific," says Brisbin, smiling at Peng. "If she's putting up with me, she's terrific."

Peng, 55, is an engaging watercolour and mixed-media artist, a printmaker and an art instructor who helps people feel comfortable experimenting.

She's also a committed community volunteer who has made it a focus of her

life to help people feel included. Making art is often the means by which she draws people in.

As the daughter and granddaughter of Japanese Canadians who were interned in British Columbia during the Second World War, Peng feels strongly about supporting diversity and inclusiveness in the community.

After the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor and Hong Kong in 1941, the Canadian government removed and detained Japanese

Canadians living in B.C. Born in Canada or not, they were sent to overcrowded internment camps with no electricity or running water in the B.C. Interior. Their homes and businesses were confiscated and sold.

Peng's parents were teens then. "After the war, they were told they couldn't go back to Vancouver, so they went east. . . . My parents came to Toronto," Peng says.

Her mother's parents, who came to Canada from Japan in the early 1900s, lived with Peng's family in Toronto. They didn't discuss their treatment during the war, but Peng knows "it was horrible."

Born and raised in Toronto, Peng remembers her own experiences with discrimination as a shy student in a mostly white neighbourhood in the 1960s.

Her family's early experiences don't often come up in conversation with Peng, but they have fuelled her efforts to create opportunities for people to feel included in their community.

"In my volunteering I have worked to build bridges for newcomers, both immigrants and migrants to our neighbourhood," Peng says. "Providing a sense of belonging to others has been a motivator for my community activities."

When she was in high school, Peng considered becoming an art teacher, but a teachers' strike made her change her mind. It never occurred to her to become an artist because it presented a difficult prospect of making a living, she says.

Instead, Peng entered a math degree program in chartered accountancy at the University of Waterloo before deciding she preferred to study general math instead, for which she received a bachelor's degree.

She worked eight years for a lobby group in the banking industry in Toronto before quitting to raise a family in Waterloo Region with her actuary husband, Mike Peng, now retired, whom she met on a canoe trip in Algonquin Park. Nancy threw herself into child-rearing and the extracurricular activities of their two sons, Bryan, now 22, and Kevin, 20. She also volunteered with Strong Start, a charitable organization that

helps children learn to read, as well as with a group that helps educate people about anaphylaxis, or severe, potentially life-threatening allergic reactions. (Both sons have severe food allergies.)

"My priority has always been family first," she says. "My volunteer work is important to me. I always believed it takes a village to raise a child."

Over the years she also took art classes, including jewelry-making, screen printing, pottery and watercolour painting. Then printmaking workshops helped seal her interest in the medium and she learned fast.

"Printmaking is very technical and I really like the technical aspects that drive people crazy," she says. "I like to always learn. There's a Japanese philosophy called 'kaizen' and it's continuous learning."

A cheerful, energetic woman with an infectious smile, Peng is a busy artist, exhibiting in four shows in January alone.

Most recently, she had a solo show called "Confluence" at Homer Watson House and Gallery in Kitchener, as featured artist at the Kitchener Waterloo Society of Artists' annual juried show. Peng won the Curator's Choice award at the gallery in 2016, which gave her the solo show.

Her Japanese heritage influenced her interest in art and in certain techniques, such as woodblock printing. Peng's mother, Mary Yamada, 90, is a sumi-e artist, a woman who trained for many years to perfect the delicate Japanese ink paintings.

"Confluence, like the meeting of rivers, expresses the coming together of my passion for both printmaking and painting," Peng writes in her notes for the show at Homer Watson Gallery. "The flow of paint and ink are brought together using both Japanese and western materials and techniques."

"She uses so many different techniques, East Asian and western, and puts them together," says Faith Hieblinger, curator at Homer Watson House and Gallery. "You end up with something quite unique yet it really speaks to Canada. It's marrying two cultures."

"Even though a lot of her work is abstract, it's not too challenging for someone who knows nothing about art," Hieblinger says. "And if you're an art expert, you can see the detail. Her preciseness is there."

On a wall at Peng's Waterloo home, where the backyard meets forest in Laurel Creek Conservation Area, is a painting by her mother. The Japanese ink-wash painting on rice paper stands apart from Peng's expressionistic watercolour paintings and mixed-media art on the walls. Peng admires her mother's mastery of the brush strokes that create different shades of black on rice paper or traditional, handmade paper called washi. Once a stroke is made, it can't be changed.

On a table is a sketchbook full of drawings and photographs from her travels with her husband to Italy last year or hiking together along the Grand River.

Instead of striving for perfection, Peng works to become proficient at sumi-e, teaching, painting, printmaking and sewing – she made chiffon bridesmaid dresses for a wedding when she was only 13.

"My style is impressionistic or expressionistic," Peng says. "I try to capture a mood rather than catch a subject. I'm trying to use my skills in different ways."

Peng divides her time between family, art and volunteer work.

Besides teaching watercolour and mixed-media painting at Button Factory Arts, a popular community arts centre in Waterloo, Peng is a co-op member and marketing chair of the Art District Gallery in St. Jacobs. She has served on school councils and is a volunteer and founding member of the Laurelwood Neighbourhood Association, an active group with a well-circulated newsletter.

She initiated a youth group in her neighbourhood that provides a safe place for young people to gather and for high school students to mentor others. She has helped organize school welcoming events for newcomers and a community art show at Waterloo Public Library's John M. Harper branch for people who don't ordinarily

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identify themselves as artists.

"We wanted to give people who aren't artists the experience of having their art in an art show," she says. The show was a success. "A daughter was thrilled to see her dad's art on the wall."

Working with the City of Waterloo and her neighbourhood association, she was an instructor for a free workshop on expressionistic portrait drawing for the "We Are Waterloo Portrait Project." The colourful self-portraits, by community members, are on display until June 9 at the City of Waterloo Museum in Conestoga Mall.

Peng has even taken to the stage, with music blaring and a crowd of people watching, to paint for fundraising competitions. She and other volunteers have organized artistic events for the city's "Culture Days" as part of a national celebration of arts and culture.

"Getting people to talk to each other is possible without a lot of formality," Peng says. "I am a connector person to some extent. I see how some groups can and should work together."

Peng didn't start sharing her art with others until 2010. Then, the community-oriented shows of Button Factory Arts appealed to her, she says. She has since won awards for her printmaking and watercolour paintings, including one from Button Factory Arts that resulted in her first solo show in 2014.

"I think where she really soars as an artist is she goes out there and is experimental and tries things and makes it happen. She's not afraid to experiment across the genres too," says Button Factory Arts executive director Heather Franklin. Franklin made Peng, then a student taking classes there, an art instructor in 2011.

Today, Peng is one of the five most popular art instructors at Button Factory Arts, Franklin says.

"I knew she'd be perfect because she has that generosity of spirit. She will be kind and compassionate," says Franklin, a visual artist. "She's gone from a student to a mentor now to other artists and other artists

come in and ask her questions. The growth has been amazing."

Peng is talented and humble, her peers say. "When she won the (Curator's Choice) award, which can be very competitive, the whole room erupted in claps and cheers," Hieblinger says. "Her eyes were filled up with tears."

"I would love to see her getting into the provincial shows and the national shows," Hieblinger says. "I think she could do that."

Jax Rula, doll artist and a member of the Art District Gallery, says she admires the "simplicity that brings out the beauty" of Peng's work.

"I see my home in them; I see my region in them. You can see she enjoys the area," she says.

Peng says her priority for her art is "to enjoy it and make it and learn new processes."

"When you're trying to get better at something, you go through a stage of struggle and a lot of people don't get beyond that stage," she says. "A lot is playing and experimenting and making a mess and learning from your mess.

You have to push yourself to always try something different."

In addition to gallery exhibits, Peng's work is in private collections and a patron has commissioned a piece.

Success, she says, is not how much she sells, but how people respond to her art.

"I do my art for my own joy and to always do something new and I like to share what I learn with other people," she says.

"If my painting shows a lot of emotion and evokes certain feelings when people look at it, that is successful. If someone else is enjoying it, that makes me happy." 

ON THE WEB

Nancy Peng's website

nancypeng.wordpress.com

Art District Gallery

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