A woman with long dark hair and bangs, wearing a blue short-sleeved shirt and a light-colored, paint-splattered apron, stands in an art studio. She is wearing white gloves and holding a paintbrush. The background shows a cluttered studio with a wooden table, various bottles, and a white plastic sheet hanging on the wall.

Imagery that makes you wonder

Unlike the artist herself,
Amanda Rhodenizer's
oil paintings hint at tension



BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK IWANYSHYN

There's a sense of unease in many of Amanda Rhodenizer's paintings that is so unlike the artist herself.

Natural and frank speaking, with long brown hair, brown eyes and an easy smile, Rhodenizer is at this moment cradling her infant daughter after a too-short sleep that is the world of new mothers. Sitting on a chair in the backyard of her Waterloo home, she's relaxed and ready to talk about her art.

Her oil paintings hint at tension – between the history of land and its future development; between people whose relationships you can't quite decipher; between figures who seem separated by a physical and emotional distance.

"There is a tension present that is really rich and makes the world interesting," says Crystal Mowry, senior curator at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery. Mowry curated "The Brain is wider than the Sky," an exhibition that runs to Sept. 23 in which Rhodenizer is one of six featured artists.

Early this summer, Rhodenizer was preparing for the art gallery exhibition as well as a solo show from Oct. 26 to Dec. 22 called "The Larger Forgetting" at Open Sesame, a gallery, shop and community creative space in downtown Kitchener.

Her basement studio and back porch of the red brick house that she shares with her partner, professional photographer Brian Limoyo, four-year-old son, Leon, baby Vivian and Captain, an elderly ginger cat, is filled with paintings and studies that will become large-scale works.

Paintings destined for the shows are wrapped in plastic so well, thank goodness, that they were able to survive a winter flood in the basement.



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"I have always known if I don't do something scary, I'm not doing enough."

AMANDA RHODENIZER



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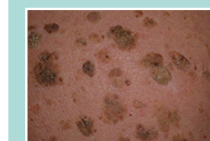
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A basement isn't the best place for a studio, she says, but she's grateful for the space, freshly drywalled and painted white. She misses the hubbub of the communal studio at the University of Waterloo where she completed a master of fine arts degree in 2014.

"There was lots of buzz around the studio. So far the feedback I get from my four-year-old is: 'Nice, nice painting, Mom,' " she says with a laugh.

Rhodenizer's figure and landscape paintings are filled with imagery that makes you wonder:

- Slender hands – a mother's? – fuss with a little girl's hair. From the expression on the girl's face, it's not clear if she wants to be fussed over or not, or why it's necessary.
- An older woman in a red robe stands on her porch watching two young women look at the vast landscape in front of them. Who

are they and what is she thinking?

- The face of a dark-haired young woman in a white coat is obscured by the binoculars she's holding up to her eyes. What is she looking at?

- A room with no one in it shows a lit lamp, a dark couch, a plant and a big window that looks out at trees. But most of the colour in the painting is in the large television's screensaver showing a wintry blue landscape.

"I have always prevented it (painting) from being too straightforward by including some element of collage or disruption," Rhodenizer said in an interview with the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, where her work was part of an exhibition in 2016.

Rhodenizer, 34, likes to explore the tensions in interactions between people – homeowners and tenants, for example – and in our relationships with place. In her

paintings, a story without all the answers unfolds in front of you.

"She is such a natural painter," says Mowry, who named the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery's exhibition after a poem by Emily Dickinson.

"Composition comes almost effortlessly to her," Mowry says of Rhodenizer. "I see such incredible examples of balance and carefulness in the relationship between the figures and the ground."

In one of Rhodenizer's new works, there's a figure looking at the view while another person looks in a different direction, Mowry says. "There's something about the quality of the interaction that is not available to us.

"When I look at artists working in portraiture, the best examples are the ones who remind you there is something going on in the space of the painting."

In Nova Scotia, where she was born, grew up and received a bachelor of fine arts degree, Rhodenizer looked at vacation rental properties and Airbnb, the online broker that points people to short-term lodging in people's homes or cottages.

She's interested in the fact that while Airbnb promotes a so-called "authentic" experience, there are also bigger issues at stake such as how it may be infringing on affordable housing as more people turn their family homes into vacation rentals.

"I'm interested in the Canadian landscape and the lengths we go to view vantage points and get access to them," she says.

In her figure paintings, "the architecture divides the tenant spaces and shows the emotional and psychological spaces and intimate moments that you get glimpses of when you stay," Rhodenizer says.

"I like pointing out the potentially

awkward moments or the interruption of otherwise perfect experiences."

In Nova Scotia, Rhodenizer used professional models and props in the rented properties to stage photo shoots that explore the idea of host and tenant in a temporary unit "and how it affects the domestic sphere."

She called the series, "Parallel Play," referring to the developmental period when children play side by side without seeming to influence each other. The series was the subject of a solo exhibition in Annapolis Royal, N.S., in 2017.

One of the houses she rented was in Blue Rocks, N.S., a place made even more meaningful to her because American modernist painter Marsden Hartley spent time in the area in the 1930s.

"I don't see a parallel with my work and his, but I saw him as an 'Airbner' because of his time travelling and staying with

families," she says. "He met wonderful people and fisher folk of the area," later exploring the tension between the "romantic coastline" and its dangers after two sons of the family he lived with died in a gale at sea.

Later, she rented an Airbnb in Waterloo for a photo shoot and subsequent paintings.

Last year, Rhodenizer was selected from among professional artists across Canada to be a Doris McCarthy artist-in-residence.

She worked on paintings that call attention to the rapid land and real estate development in Waterloo Region. Her paintings feature sites of land undergoing major changes; lots for sale that look like construction sites; mounds of dirt and neon orange snow fences.

The artist-in-residence program, offered by Ontario Heritage Trust, allowed her



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'Casual Frontier'



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to stay and work at the former Scarborough Bluffs home and studio of the late McCarthy, one of Canada's most recognized landscape painters of the second half of the 20th century.

"It was amazing, uninterrupted studio time in a home surrounded by deer, foxes and coyotes," she says. "It was a gift."

Those paintings, as well as a book featuring the paintings alongside poetry by Laurie D. Graham, poet and publisher of "Brick," an international literary journal, will be included in her solo exhibition at Open Sesame.

"Both Laurie and I were not from here. We could see some incredibly rapid changes to the area and we were thinking that these are not views of the landscape on a postcard," Rhodenizer says.

"There's the idea that this bit of land will soon have a giant condo on it and I felt compelled to memorialize it in paint."

It's the second time Open Sesame has featured her work.

"We've been following Amanda's work for a while because I think it's incredible and the evolution of her work is powerful,"

says artist Sarah Kernohan, Open Sesame's exhibition curator and a fellow graduate of UW's master of fine arts program.

The exhibition's paintings include domestic scenes painted in a palette such as pink or blue. "Everything seems coated with a different light," Kernohan says. "One is a woman at a table, but the palette is golden yellow and quite warm."

"It feels like everything is quite transitional. . . . Life is constantly in transition and space is always changing around us – especially the land as we start to deal with recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation process. We have to look at who was here before, not necessarily the generation before, but 10 generations before."

Rhodenizer's ancestors settled in Lunenburg County in the 1750s. Both grandfathers were boat builders, crafting fine schooners and small fishing boats. Her brother, Andrew, 28, continues the tradition as a boat builder in Lunenburg.

Rhodenizer grew up with this rich connection with the past in Bridgewater, N.S., the largest town on the South Side of Nova Scotia.

Her parents are retired; her mother was a social worker, her father was a vice-president of a fibreglass company in Mahone Bay.

Rhodenizer was always passionate about art, not sports and sciences that dominated the local high school. It made her feel like an outsider, she says, until she found friends in her senior high school years who also liked art and indie rock.

She has a fond memory of being a teenage customer in an art shop in Mahone Bay. The surly woman who owned the shop yelled at her for handling a brush.

"She said, 'Don't touch. The artist won't buy that brush.'"

Far from being embarrassed, Rhodenizer says she appreciated the respect the woman



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A glimpse at the artist's studio

gave the artists' supplies.

"I want to be the artist who didn't buy that brush," she remembers thinking.

At the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD University), Rhodenizer enjoyed learning from professors with "big personas," such as conceptual artist Gerald Ferguson, who recognized her last name

because of her grandfather's folk art.

For six weeks, she was studio assistant for Scottish artist Caroline Walker in London, England, as part of her master's degree.

Impatient to leave Halifax after graduation, Rhodenizer moved to Montreal and found a job in a call centre to help pay off student loans. It made her determined "to

make my art work.

"I had a tiny studio apartment where my easel was the room divider between the kitchen and cat litter," she says.

Throughout her six years in Montreal, she moved to a photo-retouching business and then to an e-commerce company where she was head photo retoucher and art director. She met Limoyo who was a photographer there.

The couple moved to Waterloo in 2012 so Rhodenizer could concentrate on her painting in the master's program at UW. It meant Limoyo would build a photography business here from scratch.

In the beginning, Rhodenizer worked mostly on more surreal, collage-based paintings, focusing on the ideas of folk and tourism and her colonial roots.

Her ancestors were offered Crown land;

Indigenous land, when they came to Canada from Europe, she says.

She called her large landscape-with-figure oil paintings for her thesis work, "Turf & Twig," named after a land-seizing ritual during early settler colonialism.

Referencing photographs on real estate websites, she shows cleared areas in front of thick forests in which figures gaze at their surroundings while they perform "surreal and fruitless tasks," suggesting unsuccessful settlement, she explains in her thesis.

"Her compositions are inspired by old illustrations of settlers making their way through unfamiliar landscape," says Lauren Weinberg, founder of Open Sesame. "I think unease is the perfect word" to describe those paintings, she says.

"I think it goes with the anxiety I feel acknowledging my settler heritage," Rhodenizer says. "I think in my work I always

On Display

"The Brain is wider than the Sky"

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery
101 Queen St. N., Kitchener
Group exhibition until Sept. 23

"The Larger Forgetting"

Open Sesame
220 King St. W., Kitchener
Solo exhibition Oct. 26 to Dec. 22

tried to figure out or navigate the damage we're doing."

While Rhodenizer prepared for her upcoming shows in Kitchener, she was especially conscious of how fortunate she is to have a partner who is "a great example of a feminist Dad."

She's quick to identify Limoyo, who bases


his busy photography business out of their home, as a major inspiration for her work.

"It's a true partnership where we're both sharing roles of trying to make this crazy ship work. He's inspiring for how he goes for things and encourages me to do that.

"I have always known if I don't do something scary, I'm not doing enough," she says.

Mowry hopes Rhodenizer will stay in Waterloo Region.

"I'd love for her to stay in this community because I selfishly like to see how artists evolve over time," Mowry says. "I think she's an amazing painter."

"She's dedicated to painting and that's really obvious with what she has produced, how much and the quality," Kernohan says. "Opportunities have been opening up for her everywhere. She's just barrelling full-speed ahead." 

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