



By Leslie Wu

photography by Liesa Kortmann

Portrait of a Perfectionist

"Am I a perfectionist?" muses artist Gisele Comtois, comfortably ensconced in the living room of her Burlington home. "In a way, I might be a perfectionist. My expectations of myself are very, very high."

So high, in fact, that Comtois once burned 50 of her own oil paintings because she wasn't happy with the turnout. "My husband said that it was silly, but it's my reputation on the line." Years later, she still doesn't regret the decision. "I can do better," she shrugs. When asked by her friends as to why she couldn't just correct the paintings, she answered that mere corrections would have been too pat a solution, and would remove spontaneity from her art.

Well-travelled, urbane and possessed of a dry wit, Comtois is also disarmingly candid.

Once, when asked by a gallery owner why he should sell her work, she responded, "If you sell good work, you will sell mine."

"I wasn't humble," she laughs.

Her confidence in herself and her work are undeniable, yet Comtois tempers this by her integrity to her own vision of art and a career that spans more than three decades.

Born in St. Marc-sur-Richelieu, QC, Gisele Comtois has been a Burlington resident for 32 years, dividing her time between Ontario and Quebec. Her travels include frequent sketching trips to explore the Gaspé coast, Charlevoix County, the Laurentians, the Eastern Townships in Quebec, the Maritimes, northern Ontario, France and Italy. »



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"You have to be happy with yourself. The mental and the physical go together and you can't have one without the other. You can ask other people's opinions, but it comes down to you."

A former student of fine arts at McMaster University in Hamilton, Sheridan College in Oakville, Musée des Beaux Arts in Montreal and Cambrian College in Sudbury, Comtois has also taught art at Sheridan, Oakville's École Ste. Marie and École St. Philippe in Burlington.

She contributes her contemporary style oil paintings to private, public and corporate collections such as the Senate of Canada and the Japanese Trade Commission to Canada. Her work has been studied for an academic piece called, "The Figure in the Landscape: A Different Perspective," and has garnered multiple awards for her paintings. She was included in 200 *New Visions*, a 1990 book depicting 200 Canadian artists, and one of her paintings was featured on a greeting card for the Toronto Hospital for Sick Children.

The fruit of her most recent trip to Sicily and southern Italy is displayed at Port Credit's Harbour Gallery, one of the largest galleries in the greater Toronto area.

"Gisele's whole life is dedicated to painting," says long-time friend and co-worker Jackie Bryant, owner of Harbour Gallery. "She takes great care in her painting, and is continually evolving."

Bryant, who has represented Comtois for 14 years, was moved to sign the artist at Harbour Gallery right from the beginning because of the colours and the positive feeling of her work. "It's very uplifting," she explains.

Much of the artist's personality animates her work, says Bryant. "She is a very warm and honest person and that is reflected in her paintings. She paints from the soul, a quality especially captured in her landscapes, which bring you into the painting and make you want to be there."

While some of Comtois' previous exhibits have examined religion in different forms, within her current exhibit, her dissemination of religion is much more covert. The painting, "Mosaïque Des Civilisations," approaches the subject through the layering of cultures within a former Arabian mosque converted into a Roman Catholic Church. A woman featured in the foreground gazes out at the viewer, reminding us that with the weight of all the generations behind her, she has become very assertive. "She's ready for the future because you never know when there will be another civilization taking over this area," says Comtois.

Another work in the collection, the "Coronation of Hermes," maintains the presence of mosques in the

"Coronation of Hermes" celebrates Comtois' love of evocative colour and subtle use of religious imagery.

background, but brings elements of both violence and peace to the forefront. It was this juxtaposition of images that, for the artist, summed up what she thought of Sicily.

The creation of these pieces is a painstaking and methodical process for Comtois, who establishes rituals to keep her focus. To avoid procrastination, which she sees as a natural occupational hazard for an artist, she listens to specific forms of music during each step of creating her pieces. "I hate the look of that blank canvas. Mozart inspires me to start that initial step, then jazz, through its freeform rhythms, allow more creativity." When approaching her landscapes, Comtois always takes a different perspective, looking at them from above, never from eye level. "From above, you see dimensions and formations that you don't see from the ground," she says.

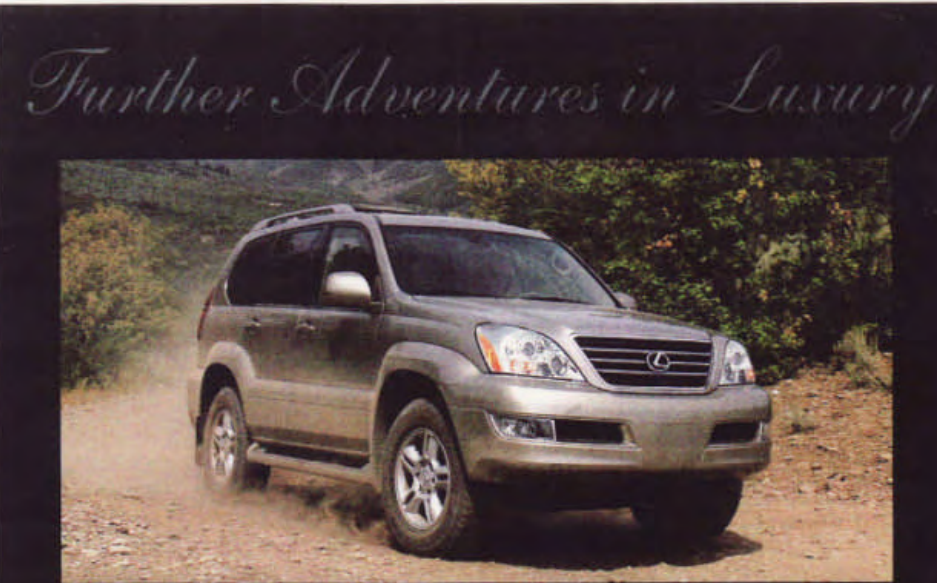
A prolific painter, her discipline in art is paralleled in her distinct approach to life. Comtois is heavily involved in holistic medicine, as well as a daily regimen of tai chi and meditation. She is also extremely active in outdoor sports. "I'm not an indoor person," she notes. "When I'm biking or skiing, I'm always working, looking at landscapes. The landscape becomes a part of me." Comtois is an early riser, and her mornings generally begin with a walk or a game of tennis. Work begins in her home studio at 8 a.m.

She sees her healthy lifestyle as an absolute necessity to maintain her artistic spark, a lesson painfully learned during a time in her life when she worked almost seven days a week, finishing 27 paintings in a short period of time. Now, she also works hard at relaxing, not just for her own peace of mind, but also for her art. "When you paint, you have to be pretty calm. It is a dialogue between you and the canvas. Once you put the ideas on paper, it becomes a monologue, and you're really alone to make your own decisions."

It is to these decisions that Comtois constantly returns in perpetual evaluation of her art and herself. "I always ask myself, am I doing the right thing? Am I repeating myself? Am I in a comfort zone?" she says. This introspection largely contributes to her sense of self-reliance. "You have to be happy with yourself. The mental and the physical go together and you can't have one without the other. You can ask other people's opinions, but it comes down to you."

Ultimately, Comtois concludes that rather than being a perfectionist, she believes her art reaches far beyond the canvas into every aspect of her life. "It's not being a perfectionist to sell good works of art," she says with a wry grin. "It's being honest and loyal to your work and to yourself. I've had a very full life, a very rich life, and without my art, I wouldn't be the same person. It's fed my intellect, and my soul. I can go on painting until I die and nothing's going to stop me now."

Although every day brings new challenges as Comtois strives to meet her own exacting standards as an artist, it is a rewarding pursuit. "Unfortunately, there isn't that much beauty in the world today," she observes. "But when you paint a subject, you become a part of that subject. You can make life beautiful." ☘



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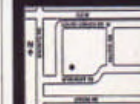
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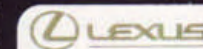
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