

December 21, 2003  
OUTDOORS

## OUTDOORS; A Maine Artist Enjoys His Brushes With Nature

By James Prosek

On a recent trip to Maine, I was introduced to the artist John Walker by my friend Waqas Wajahat at Walker's home on a peninsula in John's Bay near the town of Damariscotta. On the tip of Walker's property is a point off which he said he often fished for striped bass in the summer, and on the south side is a large tidal pool that has been the primary subject of his paintings for the past few years.

Like many artists who have lived in or visited Maine, Walker has developed an affection for the irregularity of this coastline, its appearance transformed hourly by the fickle weather and dramatic tides. And though his works came out of the tradition of English landscape painting of John Constable and J. M. W. Turner, his more recent work depicts Maine, as have others including Ralph Blakelock, Winslow Homer, Marsden Hartley and Milton Avery.

Depending on the tides, which in this area are more than 30 feet, this tidal pool is either glassy and full of water, or like a moonscape with puddles. Walker visits it in all its changing moods, painting in early morning before sunrise, in the fog at dusk or by moonlight. Beside the cove he has erected a tent that shelters several large canvases from the weather.

The canvas Walker is working on at the moment is tied by its stretcher frame to a tree. The surface is layered with paint applied with brushes and with fingers, textured with cove mud suspended in an acrylic resin, along with sand and pine needles, and any moths that might become stuck in it. The painting, almost sculptural, is so organic that one senses it might be seduced by siren call back into the cove from which it seemed to have emerged.

Often with a cigar between his teeth, Walker stands on the edge of his tidal pool for hours, the silence interrupted only by the occasional hum of a lobster boat engine, by the ripping sounds of the changing tide or by a calling loon. With his labrador retrievers, RV and Sky, by his side, Walker paints pictures, largely abstract, largely expressionistic, some with representational elements -- a silver moon, a sunset reflection.

"My best memories are of fishing," Walker said, "I used to join my brothers, fishing in matches for the local pub team, the Raven pub. We'd catch carp, gudgeon and chub, and even the occasional

eel."

He counts among his favorite works Gustave Courbet's painting of a trout. And why is he so fascinated with water? "Because it moves," he said.

Walker was born in 1939, one of four children, in the industrial town of Birmingham, England. He made his mark in the 1960's as an abstract painter. He lived in New York, then in Australia, but it was not until he moved to John's Bay 15 years ago that he found a familiar subject in water. Initially, Walker feared these paintings were too representational and did not show them. When he finally did, they were universally praised for being original and poignant.

One of his favorite pigments is Indian yellow, which mimics the ochres and olives of the rock weed when hanging limp at low tide; also the color of Walker's favorite childhood fish, the tench.

"In the old days, this color, Indian yellow, was made from bulls' urine," he said. "They fed the bulls mango leaves to give it that intense golden color."

Not a bad life for a bull, Walker said, because they kept him alive.

That was the kind of simplicity that Walker seemed to strive for. The doors of his home were open, allowing flies, his dogs and cats and whatever else to wander in and out at will. Amid the sounds and smells of the rocky coast, damp from the outgoing tide, it was obvious that besides being a painter, Walker was a naturalist, one who had found a way to depict not only the forms and edges of nature, but also its texture, sounds and smells.

At the end of the day, in his indoor studio, a converted garage, he completes his works. Beyond the several canvases and the large windows, the sun set behind the bay. On this visit, Walker seemed uncomfortable, almost embarrassed by his work.

"Forget these," he said, and turned to look at the distant islands, "how about that painting."

Photo: John Walker has erected a tent for painting the tidal pool in Maine that he lives by.  
(Photograph by Waqas Wajahat)