

Shirley Thompson



Cameo, 48" x 24"



Fibres, 24" x 18"

Embracing the Beautiful

written by Kylie Serebrin

Upon viewing Shirley Thompson's vibrant and invigorating paintings, it may come as a surprise to hear her describe her personal roots as "rustic, subdued and desolate". Shirley was, in fact, born in Bralorne, British Columbia – an isolated, historic underground gold-mining community, which can only be reached by travelling 60 miles down a dirt road from the town of Lillooet. "The journey through this area is absolutely beautiful," Shirley notes, "but when I mention Bralorne to people, few have heard of it."

In Bralorne, Shirley's family treasured their rural lifestyle. They lived without running water, chopped their own wood, tended to the garden and ordered anything else they required from the Sears catalogue – including Shirley's first bicycle. Her family celebrated this tranquil existence until Shirley's father was offered a job in Elliot Lake, Ontario. Despite meeting many wonderful and

interesting people along their journey, Shirley and her mother found themselves homesick for the west coast and in under a year her family returned to Vancouver.

Shirley attended Lord Roberts Elementary School, followed by King George High School. All through school, her greatest interest and focus was on art. "Even in social studies, the part I loved best was colouring the maps," Shirley admits with a laugh. "My first true engagement with art occurred when I was around 14 to 15 years old. I liked to take my sketch book down to the Rowing Club in Stanley Park and various other areas, and I would just record subject matter – anything and everything I saw that interested me. Later, I became interested in painting from photos of the coast of France and other distant places." Nevertheless, as a young woman, Shirley only periodically immersed herself in the visual arts, sometimes stepping away from creating for years at a time. "I only thought of art as a hobby," she remembers.

Piano, on the other hand, struck Shirley as a possible career path and in 1986 she and her husband (whom she met at 17 and fell in love with in art class) packed their bags and visited London, England to pursue their mutual passion for music. "We wrote songs and played together in London. Ultimately, I couldn't see myself living there – so nothing came of it, except for an extraordinary



Floria Bronze, 30" x 24"



Carranda Geld, 30" x 24"



Talia's Tapestry, 60" x 48"



Solitude, 24" x 18"

adventure," Shirley reminisces.

Upon returning to Canada, Shirley's health prevented her from working, so she acquired some pastels and started creating portraits. "I really didn't think they were very good," she admits, "but I still have them, and today I can recognize some potential in them." Around the same time, Shirley remembers spotting her first Leroy Neiman painting, which left an indelible impression on her. "I simply couldn't believe that someone could take so many colours and shapes and make something recognizable out of them! I was absolutely stunned with amazement, and I couldn't fathom how he might have done the work with a brush. I later found out he worked with knives, so I had to give the palette knife a try, myself," she explains.

As Shirley began to work with oil paints, she was also inspired by the Group of Seven – particularly Tom Thompson and Lawren Harris – whose unique visions and adept use of colour and composition captured her attention. "I turned my focus to the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, as well," she recalls. "The intensity and vibrancy Monet, Renoir and Van Gogh were able to capture through their thick application of paint drew me into their art."

This was a very powerful period of awakening for Shirley. "I just could not get enough of art. It was as if some unseen force was really pushing me to pursue painting," she explains. "I took many courses through the Federation of Canadian Artists, alongside many very well-known and respected Canadian artists. At first, I copied a lot, but then I ventured to discover if I had any talent of my own." Shirley continued painting with oils and palette knives and slowly started to see the rewards of patience and practice, and even sold her first painting.

"When I invited my mother to see the first oil painting I sold, her comment was: 'there's too much paint!' Having lived through the Depression, frugality was her way," Shirley explains with a chuckle. However, after that first critique, Mom was Shirley's number one fan.

Back then, Shirley's dining room was her studio, so she had to abandon oils (due to their offensive scent) in favour of acrylics. At first, Shirley detested the look of acrylics, so she spent the better part



Romana, 48" x 24"

of 3 years trying to force them to imitate the appearance of oils. "Of course, I know now that acrylics will never look like oils, but I'm more satisfied with them after all of my experimentation," she states. Over the last decade, Shirley has been painting every day or evening, for as long as her mood dictates. Whatever muse led Shirley to that first Leroy Neiman canvas and inspired her to pick up her own palette knife has undoubtedly



Klein





previous page, Lu mona Delta, 48" x 72"
left, Birch and Iris, 48" x 36"

above, Pandova's Passion, 48" x 72"

remained faithfully by her side.

Today, Shirley paints in a studio with profound meaning for her: her mother's old apartment. "My mother lived to be 104 years old, and she was a very strong influence in my life and on my art. Now, working in the space where she lived, she is always with me and continues to be a deep source of inspiration," Shirley confides. Innumerable other things trigger her imagination, as well. Nature, astonishing sunsets, unique lighting or shapes, unusual colours and interesting music all provoke her to create.

Moreover, Shirley continues to find herself inspired and challenged by other artists' remarkable achievements. "I have at least 60 books on artists," she confesses. "Mark Rothko, Jean-Paul Riopelle, the Painters Eleven, les Automatistes, Wolf Kahn, Jack Shadbolt,

Georgia O'Keefe, Pietro Piccoli, Brian Rutenberg – these artists and so many others impress and motivate me. My interests span Impressionism, Expressionism, Abstraction, Realism, Representation and beyond. My love of art knows no bounds – when a piece of art is good, it's just good, and I know it the instant I see it." The more Shirley has educated herself about art, the more her appetite for knowledge and desire to improve her personal technique has grown.

Shirley's own painting process usually begins with a certain colour scheme in mind. Often she simply starts to lay colours upon the canvas without determining a specific composition – other than the general placement of her subject matter. As the painting evolves, she starts to recognize where it's going. "If I do start a painting with something specific in mind, and I find the creation going in a



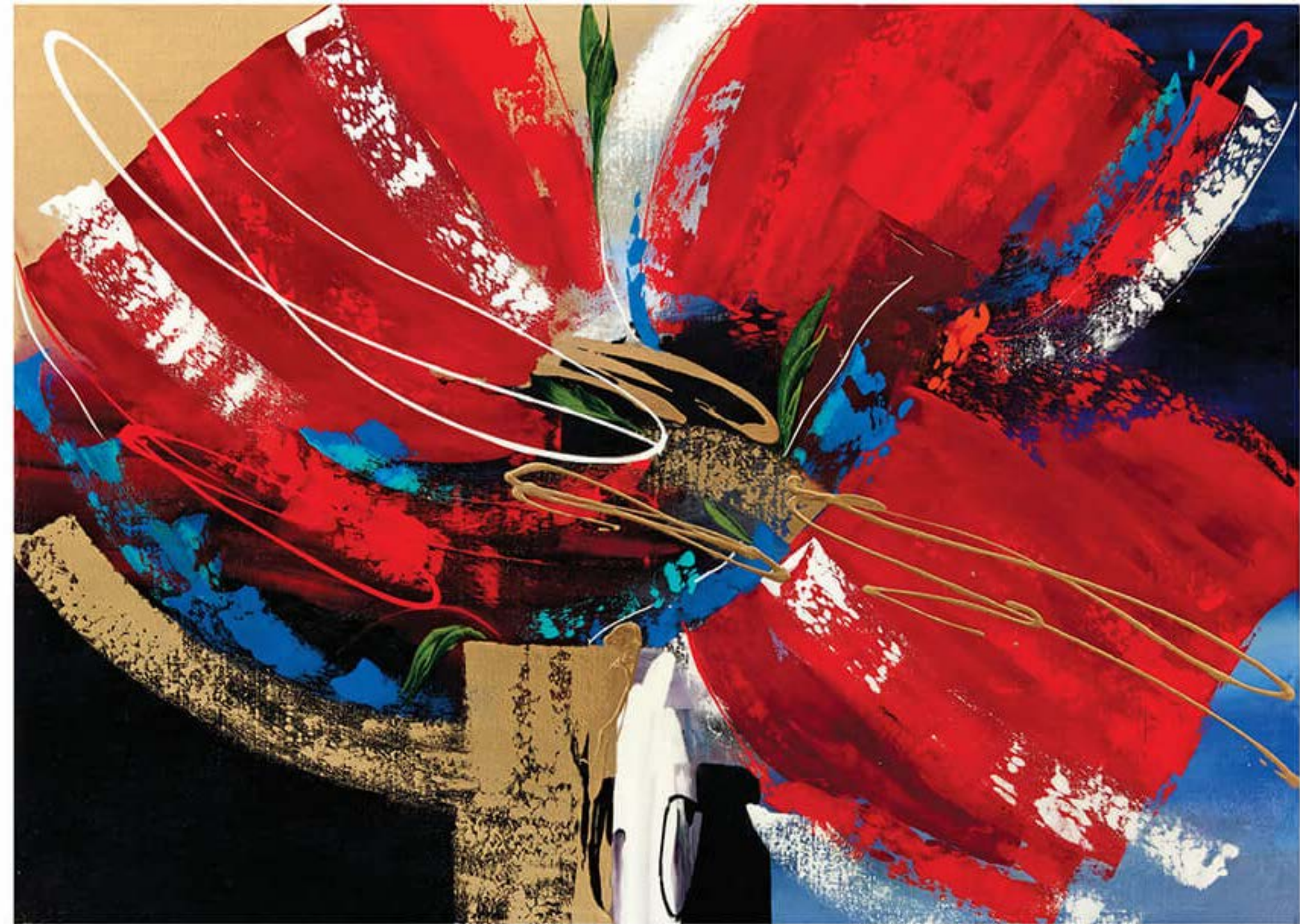
Cordage Gold, 48" x 36"



Moroccan Ruby, 24" x 18"



Sabia's Turquoise, 48" x 48"



Boiza no Blue, 36" x 48"



Barcelona Eve, 48" x 48"



Mandarine, 60" x 48"

different direction, I let myself follow that direction. When I don't stick rigidly to an idea, I find that I come up with much more exciting pieces. Those pieces that surprise me are also usually the most engaging for viewers, precisely because they are unpredictable," she points out.

"Sometimes, I also lay my canvas and easel on the floor, throwing paint right out of the bottle. This technique is not without high risk – one

wrong stroke can destroy a great painting – but it also yields incredible rewards when it works," she reflects. More often, Shirley's practice involves rotating her palette knife in such a way as to blend several colours picked up with the knife, applying them to the canvas while keeping all of the colours pure, which is quite a complicated feat. "I spent 3 years practicing this method," she divulges. "Unlike most other artists, I use my



palette knife for almost all of my work. The way I use it is especially unusual, insofar as most artists who use a palette knife allow the edge of the knife to remain visible in their works. In my works, you don't see my knife's edge." The brilliance of Shirley's colours is another defining characteristic of her paintings, given that she applies them directly to her canvases without first mixing them on a palette.

To others starting to explore her craft, Shirley advises following one's instincts, above all else. "Never listen to people who think they know what you should be creating. Do not go down a path because a gallery owner tells you that something different will sell more successfully. Art is not about selling, it's about communicating what's in your soul. Never, ever compromise your vision," she demands. "Take courses from those artists whose work you love, learn all you can and then spend as much time as possible working on your craft. You'll be amazed at what materializes! Lead the art world by your own example, and don't ever hope to 'arrive' at an end point. There is always another painting waiting for you to imagine it and give it a voice."

Shirley also emphasizes the importance of a strong support system for a budding artist. "I could not have succeeded without the unwavering encouragement of my husband throughout my journey," says Shirley. "I also believe that without the support of certain gallery professionals - like former gallery owner Guy Dagenais, his manager Ingrid Wypkema, and colleague Sharon Danhelka - I would not be where I am today. I credit them with the fact that my paintings can now be found in many private and corporate collections throughout North America, Europe, Asia, Australia and India. I am now working with my wonderful art agent Ingrid Wypkema, who loves and embraces my work wholeheartedly. It is imperative not to overlook other people's caring, hard work and good deeds."

Taking the time to cultivate personal happiness and inner peace is Shirley's final secret of success. "I have a very strong love of nature and animals, so my husband and I often drive through the countryside, just to enjoy the spectacular scenery," she notes. "We still make time to play music together, as well - I play my Fender jazz



above 'Sweet Eden, 48" x 24"
le fl. Fondant Jewel, 24" x 18"

bass and sing, and he plays the guitar." Other times, the couple simply stops to enjoy a beautiful sunset over English Bay, with a piece of chocolate and a glass of champagne.

It is Shirley's certain belief that painting emanates from deep within an artist. Thus, the greatest painting is born when an artist feeds his or her soul, embraces all that nature has to offer and lives to enjoy every moment to the fullest.

To view more of Shirley Thompson's work, visit www.ingridfinearts.com.