

The Williams Mill – Halton’s Treasure

by John Sommer

In the early 1980's the splendid old buildings that now make up **Williams Mill Visual Arts Centre** in Glen Williams were considered to be, according to advice of a restoration architect, beyond repair. **Douglas and Mary Lou Brock** had purchased the property because they sensed the buildings' historical and aesthetic value. They did not follow the architect's advice but listened to their own instinct that urged them to restore the buildings. It took them ten years to do that. In late 1994, the Williams Mill was ready and its many rooms became studios for artists.

Early in 1995, Mary Lou Brock opened a Gallery in the complex, and six glass blowers joined the growing group of artists, forming **Glen Williams Glass**, under the guidance of the well-known glass artist and teacher **Andrew Kuntz**. A good ten years later the **Williams Mill Visual Arts Centre** has become a destination for art lovers from far and wide. It has also had an amazing effect on the creative people in the Halton Hills Region.



We imagine artists to work in isolation, alone in their studios, dreaming up fabulous art objects to tempt an art-conscious population. But when artists are working in an environment where they constantly rub

shoulders with other, nearby artists, the creative sparks will fly back and forth between them, with the result that all of them evolve, by competing and measuring themselves to a higher standard. The artists of Halton Hills have come into their own, as recent exhibitions in Glen Williams, the Georgetown Cultural Centre, the Artisan's Attic, the cottage in Cedarvale Park, and the Main Street Inn demonstrate, and a great part of that growth has come about because of the stimulation from the Williams Mill.

A visit to the Mill is an uplifting experience. I always visit the Gallery first, and I am never disappointed. There is always a ceramic bowl, or glass vase, a piece of jewellery, a painting or a sculpture, that immediately arrests my eyes and challenges my intellectual faculties. A door leads from the Gallery into

the studio of **Janice Smith**, a metalsmith who produces sterling silver jewellery of great distinction. Another door leads into the studio of **Gordon Wright**, an internationally known designer of very modern stained glass windows. Every house should have a window designed by Gordon; they are openings into a world of order and restraint, very different from the usual chaos of our time.



Step out into the courtyard and into the large shared studio of stone sculptors **Mary Ellen Farrow**, **Eileen Millen** and **Michael Young**. Here are three carvers of stone that create sculpture you want to handle and caress. These three are obviously on the same wave length. Their work is not pretty but powerful, abstracted to a point where the essence of a form or an emotion becomes paramount, and all the frivolous ornamentation falls by the wayside.

Next to this studio is the workshop of the **Halton Carving Club**. Here rules tradition. The members of this group produce carvings, mostly of animals so realistic that you expect them to run away. Some are sophisticated, some possess the

engaging naivité of the older folk carvings I have seen at the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa-Hull. Across the courtyard is **Marlene Madole's** little studio. Marlene is a superlative water-colourist who has refined her work over the years from a bold realism to light-filled and seemingly weightless impressions.



Next one enters the enormous and majestic space of the Stone Building. Here in an old power plant with rough stone walls and huge windows are the studios of fibre artist **Christine Ford**, painter and framer **Jim Reid**, and **Naomi Assenheim**, who melds techniques of carving and jewellery making learned in the Canadian Arctic and in Mexico, to create unique jewellery that unifies the wisdom of the past with the present. Downstairs in the same building, **Susan Wakefield** paints and crafts large and small metal art pieces; all of them produce first class art.

Follow the sidewalk across the bottom of the hill to the Parkside level of the Yellow Mill where **Carolyn Filter** produces her exquisite pottery and **Nancy Farrell** paints superlative canvases depicting nature and technology in brilliant colours. Nancy is also a sculptor of distinction. **Sheri Tenaglia**, a painter who works in a variety of media from soft pastels to vibrant oils has recently joined this studio. From there, go back up the hill and into the main

level of the Yellow Mill to the studios of **Marg Peter**, a painter and printmaker of meticulous etchings, and **Candace Slack**, a painter and photographer, and **Jo Walterson**, who paints sensual flowers, and windswept Georgian Bay scapes in both oil and watercolour. **Bonnie Glass** creates one of a kind collaged garments; nothing I know of can compete with these sumptuous and grand fashion statements.

Upstairs in the same building, Studio 14 is home to **Tiziana Manieka**, **Peter Perko**, and **Tracy Wild**, graphic designers of skill and originality, along with **Karen Reczuch**, one of Canada's most prolific and talented illustrators of books for children. I collect children's books and I have several of hers in my collection. Across the hall, **Christine Montague** is a most accomplished painter of portraits and works of the imagination. From **Tony Lolic's** small office he operates **ArtBiz**, a company dedicated to helping artists develop the business side of being an artist in order to facilitate their ability to earn a living doing what they love to do, make art.

One more building remains; the blue building is the glass blowing studio. At almost any time of the day or night, one or more of the glass artists, **Andrew Kuntz**, **Tara Marsh**, **Carol Nesbitt**, **Paul Rodrigue**, **Doug Scott**, **Johnson Seem-ing Yu**, or **Jennifer Tarrant** will be at work making a blob of hot glass into one of the bewitching glass objects waiting on the display shelves for customers.



Don't walk away from the Williams Mill Visual Arts Centre without a purchase. This is art of exceptional quality and value.

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