

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

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Harding Bush: Watercolor - a medium employing many tricks.

Ayer, Massachusetts is a quaint little place found in Middlesex County located 35 miles from Boston. Established in 1871, the town is 9.5 square miles with an estimated 7,427 people living there, according to the 2010 census.

Harding Mudge Bush Watercolors is a watercolor arts store located at 30 Main Street, Ayer. This innovative art space opened up in Ayer's Main Street Historic District on April 1, 2013. It is a wonderful shop filled with many paintings created by Harding Bush, a 37 year Ayer resident.



What makes this moderate sized art shop so special? Maybe it is how the Harding Mudge Bush watercolors on the shelves, walls, tables, floor, and desk depict such beautiful cityscapes, landscapes, and seascapes of Boston, Ayer, and other places in the United States and abroad. Maybe it is how this teaching space has such a strong classroom appeal. And

probably it is because Bush has dedicated his life to being a full-time artist since 1975.

It is artist Harding Bush who pulls everything together to utilize this unique art space work efficiently and to make his watercolors to sell. He has painted over 1550 watercolors and placed most of them in businesses such as those found along Route 128 and in residential homes. Bush and Sally, his wife, have raised two children in this community, said Harding Bush at an April 26, 2013 interview with the Wilderness House Literary Review that took place inside the Harding Bush Watercolors art store.

In fact, Harding Mudge Bush Watercolors is the second store that Bush has owned. The first art store that Bush had opened in



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1980, closed in 1991, and was situated on Park Street just two blocks west from his current shop, he said.

Originally from Wakefield, Massachusetts, Bush and his family moved to Ayer after a stint in Detroit. He worked as the Product Manager for the Space Science Division of Ayer's Whittaker Corporation before settling in as a professional watercolor artist.

While working for the Whittaker Corporation, he started taking part-time watercolor classes with teacher Roger Blum at Atlantic Union Community College in Lancaster, the next town over from Ayer, for about four years. This enlightening experience helped Bush make the decision to change careers. He left the corporate world to pursue painting full-time.



His appreciation of art didn't begin as an adult. "I illustrated World War II," Bush joked. "I'm kidding," he said. "All little boys drew much to the dismay of their teachers. There was no television. We knew who the book illustrators were. We knew the names. Like Norman Rockwell was in many boys' lives all the time. And as a group, when I was a kid, on a rainy Saturday afternoon, we boys would get together and draw. We'd get a book and we'd copy – you know – draw drawings from the book. Yes, I've done art all of my life.



Bush's grandmother actually was the person who introduced him to painting. "When I was a sophomore in high school, my grandmother gave me an oil painting set. It wasn't one of these that you go into the dime store and buy. She really got a good one! I enjoyed it a great deal. The painting was never done because you it was an oil, and you can change things. I found that frustrating. I went to the library, and I stumbled upon Dewey Decimal 751 Watercolor. (My mother was a youth librarian.) And I discovered a book from Ted Kautzky. He was from Rockport. I followed the instructions in the book and copied every painting. When I finished that book, I could do a watercolor. Then I continued to do them even when I was working, as my job took me all over the world." Although experienced with oils and acrylics, Bush prefers using

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watercolors. He said, "I have done acrylics. I've done oils. I probably have done three oils and am not happy with them. Like I say, they're not done because you can correct it. And the acrylics, for me, they just come out a little too garish. When you get used to watercolors – and watercolors are different from oil – the medium demands that it comes out of some part of your brain that you're not familiar with. It's like when the batter is looking at the baseball coming at him, he's not doing calculations. This is instant knowledge of what you're doing. And a lot of watercolor is like that."

Bush has a basic set artistic process for his watercolors that evolves into different paintings. "I usually start with a sky, and I go from light to dark. Then it's a layering process. I like to think if where I'll pull some washes down and decide if it's dark enough. And if not, I'll re-wet the paint and put some more pigment in."



It normally takes Bush two hours to several days to complete a watercolor. He likes to take time with capturing the intricate details of the scene that he is painting. For instance, he is currently working on a painting that may take four or five days to finish because there's a great amount of detail work necessary. The painting is called "DeLuca's Market Charles Street, Boston". He has completed some paintings in a half hour, though. "When I'm in the field, they go more quickly because you have to move fast. The light changes, and your conditions are entirely different. The wind, for example, effects the evaporation. If you have a hot sun, it effects. There are a lot of things that are different when you're painting outdoors. And you tend to get better paintings because you have to think about it. You have to adjust," he said. For Bush, it is nice to work from photographs that he has taken as well as from snapshots by other people. But he truly enjoys painting cityscapes, seascapes, and landscapes onsite.

He likes to work with Windsor Newton, a British company, for watercolors and Archer's Watercolor Paper, a French company, whose materials have been made in the same factory since 1493, Bush said.



Bush learned about the different pigments and papers to use through reading about them in various art books. "I picked up which pigments to use principally from books. There are a couple of pigments that are at Windsor Newton that I don't like because, for example, there's one that dries out and flakes off the palate. And there are several books



that tell you about pigments and they go into a great deal of scientific background to them," he said. "And what's really important is how lightfast are they. And all the pigments in the tube that they come in are marked with this code that tells you how lightfast." Lightfast refers to how long the pigments will last against light. The ultraviolet light can just bleach it out, said Bush. Bush enjoys using a lot of bright

colors, such as Cadmium Red, Cadmium Blue, and Cadmium Yellow, as can be seen in his "The First Baptist Church of Boston" and "Vermont Cows Sun Rise". But sometimes he like to contrast colors with dark and light, as viewed in "Boston Night/Citgo" where the reflection of city lights along with the moon's glow can be seen on the Charles River – even the popular Citgo sign is reflected in the dark, shimmering water. The sky is black at the top of the painting. As the eye descends downwards to the buildings, the colors become grayer, lit up by beautiful, well-lit skyscrapers. And the moon up in the night's sky looks real, floating between the Prudential Building and the infamous, vibrant Citgo sign. The water is dark with light-reflected squiggles on the dark water. Sometimes windows are noticed, but the buildings are 'light-sensitive' in the sense that they shine from the artificial electricity and the moon's glow that is in the background.

"What I did was underpainting the reflection on the water with different bright colors," he said. "And then I rubbed this area with paraffin wax before painting the water. The wax is a resist and the bright colors show through. The buildings were painted with a sponge loaded with many colors. Watercolor is a medium employing many tricks."

"Boston Night/Citgo" shows Bush's wonderful control of the paint brush, of dark and light contrasts, and of reflections.

"Newbury at Clarendon, Boston" is another highly skilled watercolor by Harding Bush. "I did that onsite over a long period of time... Probably for four days or more,"



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said Bush. He painted images of the Church in beige; stores in reds and light greens; cars in bright yellow, dulled maroon, and black; and people walking about painted in bright colors: blues, greens, pinks, reds. This painting, like Bush's other artworks, is realistic yet painterly. A lot of activity happens in this artwork.

"Blue Ridge Flash Flood" is a watercolor that is more ominous with shades of enlightenment throughout the work. There are dark clouds seen in the upper right hand corner of this wilderness scene where water crashes over rocks, carries three uprooted trees down the falls. Though some light blue sky is present through white-looking clouds off to the left of the painting, the majority of the pigments are dull, almost muted. There are browns, tans, dark greens, creamy whites, dark blacks seen throughout the painting. Like "Boston Night/Citgo" and "Newbury at Clarendon, Boston", "Blue Ridge Flash Flood" has much movement going on. But it is different as the same time as it is a nature scene, not a city scene.

Watercolorist Harding Bush enjoys his work and his life. His work reflects the beauty and action found in life – the city, the country, the sea, and people. In his younger years, he used to hunt, play hockey, race skis and motorcycles. Nowadays, he spends his free time with his wife, two children, and four grandchildren.

