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photography by Liesa Kortmann

Evolution of an Artist

Forget the starving artist. A new breed of creative type is entering the scene in numbers. These are senior artists who spent decades perfecting their talents as hobbies and second incomes while working in other professions, paying mortgages and building pensions. Once free from the nine-to-five, thanks to good health and (sometimes) early retirement, these people view the golden years as the time for a career change.

Artistic pursuits are high on the what-to-do-now list. Finally, all those years investing in a hobby pay off and the cost of a camera, computer or canvas becomes a full-time business expense. Never mind rocking the days away on the front porch — there are new markets to conquer and breaking in is the first step.

Regional artist Tony Hughes is taking these first steps carefully. He has worked for 27 years as a teacher and coach at Hillfield Strathallan College in Hamilton. Originally a mechanical engineer in Wales, he was called to Canada in 1977 when the private school needed a foreign-trained teacher. “Actually,” Hughes says, “they needed a jack-of-all-trades. I was hired to take photographs, design the yearbook, build stage sets, teach art and math, and coach sports.” Now he’s a visual art teacher instructing students from grades 5 to 10 and a coach of both the girls and boys championship-winning volleyball teams.

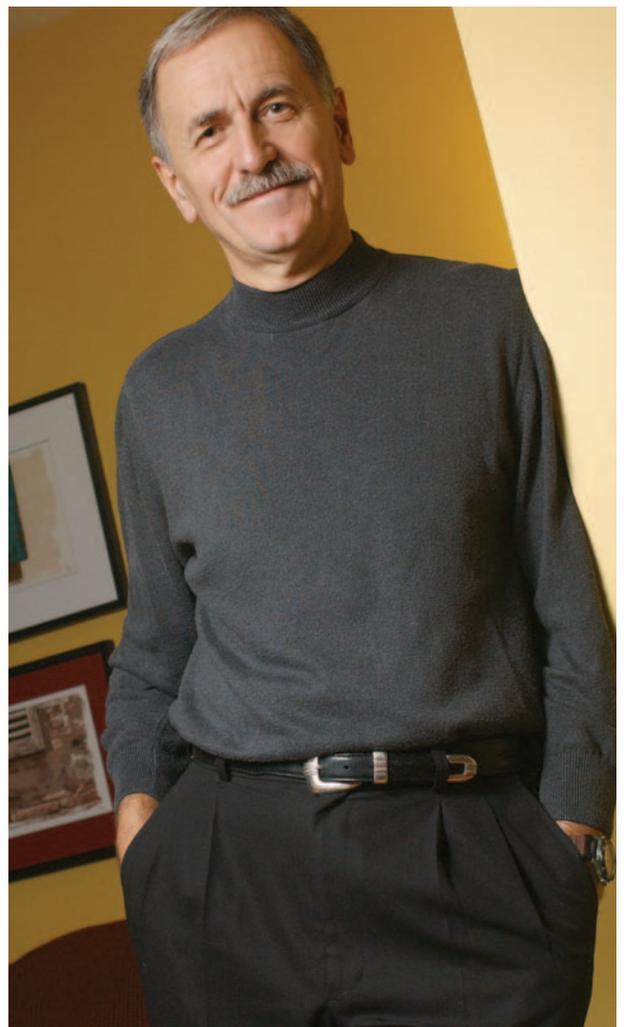
But this year is different. He has taken a sabbatical from a career that has spanned nearly three decades.

Hughes is spending time in his Burlington home near the lakeshore working on graphic design projects and photography. His graphic art sideline involves both paid and volunteer work. He has won regional awards for brochures he designed for the Art Gallery of Hamilton and Pier 21 in Halifax. The latter commemorates the point of entry for most of Canada’s immigrants from 1928 to 1971.

But his personal passion is photography — specifically, producing glycée prints. These are computer-scanned photographs printed on watercolour paper. Most of his work is done as a series based on location, and most photographs are taken while travelling. His collection of themed exhibits includes images of food and flowers from France, landscapes from the Arizona desert and, more recently, sports journalism-style stills from the time trials at the 2003 World Cycling Championships held in Hamilton.

But this year the Maritimes provide inspiration. Hughes is focusing his camera on the sides of buildings, boats and heritage sites along the East Coast, specifically in Lunenburg, NS, where Hughes and his wife have a summer home. Lunenburg is a small coastal town defined by narrow streets and a seafaring heritage. Thanks to the preservation of the old-town section, Lunenburg was designated a Canadian National Heritage District in 1991 and a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995. »





Burlington's Tony Hughes represents one of many seniors who have decided to pursue new career passions. A computer aids this artist as he captures intimate details of everyday objects. His favourite subject matter includes graphic details of Nova Scotia's architectural icons.

Attracted by the rich colours of Nova Scotia's heritage buildings, Hughes captures the graphic details of the area's architectural icons in his photographs. Picture the bow of a red dory backed by a deep green wall of peeling paint, or a rusty door lock against white aged wood enlarged several times its size. One of his favourites is a close-up of a simple deep green pole worn by the region's salt air photographed against a red wall. The result looks like an abstract colour-field painting with the grain of the wood creating the illusion of brush strokes.

Most of Hughes' maritime images are 16 by 24 inches in size, but he plans to make bigger ones for exhibitions at private galleries he's courting in Toronto. Using two Apple computers in his home office, Hughes scans each 35mm or medium format photograph and adjusts the colour balances to replicate the original subject accurately. Printed on watercolour paper, the images benefit from both the texture and ink absorption properties of this product.

Occasionally, Hughes will use a "watercolour filter" available in the software he uses to create the illusion that the final image is a realism painting rather than a photograph. But most pieces retain their photographic qualities, capturing unique details of commonplace objects and ready-made still lifes as seen up close through an 80- to 200-millimetre camera lens with macro capabilities.

The trick, according to Hughes, is being able to see these compositions when you pass by them and take advantage. "Never say, 'I'll take it on the way back,'" he says. "Because the light will change and you'll never get two chances at the same picture." Hughes admits he spends many hours meticulously paying attention to detail. Often he'll walk along the side of a street early in the day, then down the other side later that evening spending the entire time searching corners and crevices for that ideal image.

Whatever the subject matter or location, his photographs are defined by two qualities: a printing technique that includes blurred edges, and a calm visual resonance reflective of the man behind the camera.

Hughes is a serene and understated individual who is self-admittedly intent on whatever project is consuming him at the moment. As he speaks, his daughter's cat, new to the home a year ago, curls around him, insisting on sharing the desk chair — a demand Hughes patiently accommodates.

As a step toward the designation of professional artist, Hughes' first move is to build a repertoire of images and private gallery contacts. Also, he plans to visit South America this spring to work on another series of photographs. After that he won't commit, but he's certain he'll continue perfecting his talent after he returns to teaching, and for many years to follow. 🐾