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LELAND

Painter's work blooms with color in the heart of winter

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Contributing Writer

“I want my bold strokes and bright colors to reveal my energy and emotions,” said Leland-based

Expressionist painter Brenda J. Clark, who isn't short on either despite being surrounded by a world at rest.

A visit to Clark's Leland gallery — or her Web site at brendajclark.com — may do wonders for the winter blahs, transporting viewers to a brighter, sunnier world even though Clark takes most of her current inspiration from a predominately white canvas: winter in northern Michigan.

Clark grew up in a landscape of rolling hills and farms not unlike those of northern Michigan, minus the lakes, of course.

“I grew up 10 miles north of Green City, Missouri, on the Clark homestead that was owned by my father's father and his father's father,” she said. “When Clark was in the sixth grade, a fire destroyed their home, and the family moved into town.

“Mom, Dad, my brother and I lost all of those sentimental things that tend to shape one's life. It was probably the first time I ever saw my father cry.” Although the family never



Courtesy photo

ABOVE: Leland artist Brenda J. Clark shown painting “en plein air” with her daughters, Helene Claire (left) and Flora June Mitchell. **RIGHT:** Clark's “November's Kissing Manitous.”

returned to the farm, the twelve years that Clark had spent there forever marked her. She learned about light, texture and color through living close to nature, and continues to love being outdoors, painting on location almost exclusively.

“I believe that the passion I have for my memories is close to the passion that I attempt to capture when I paint,” she said. “No one may quite understand my color choices, or my mark-making. Yet I hope that most develop some feelings from my paintings, and that these feelings stir them to think, examine, and imagine.

“Such thinking is all that I want, along with the subliminal beauty of the paint stroke.”

A colorful blend

Clark's work and her particular style place her in line with

two of the great movements in art history: that of painting “en plein air” (in the open air), and Expressionism.

Plein air painting became popular among 19th-century French artists known as the Impressionists. Painters like Claude Monet, Pierre Renoir and others would, like Clark does today, spend long hours outdoors in all types of weather trying to capture the fleeting nature of light.

And Clark's use of bright, saturated color and her emphasis on mark-making place her with Expressionists like Edvard Munch, Auguste Macke, Marc Chagall, Oskar Kokoschka and others.

Expressionism, which flourished between 1905 and 1925, is an art movement characterized by the use of intense color, agitated brushstrokes, and disjointed spatial relationships.

Such artists portray personal and spontaneous self-expression in response to the world around them.

With its roots in the works of painters like Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and the Fauves, Expressionism sought to portray the artist's emotional response in the most intense manner possible.

For Clark, emotions produce color on canvas that keeps flowing even when the lakes freeze.

“Color moves me to intuitively create the intensity of a particular moment,” said Clark. “My paintings wear my brush strokes, and each mark conveys as much as it can about the moment.”

A fresh coat

Clark, who earned a bachelor of fine arts at Truman State University and a master's at



Kent State University, taught graphic arts at Michigan State University from 1989 to 1999 and currently resides in Leland with her husband, Johnston Mitchell, and their two young daughters.

“We left our stability in Lansing and moved up north,” Clark said. “My husband and I were both awarded residency grants to work in the public schools three days a week, him in creative writing, and me in graphic arts.

“But mostly, it was about the landscape. I knew that here I

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could see sand dunes, hills, the water.

"Here, I can go out and paint with no distractions. I'm still in awe of the fact that I can get out of the house and go paint — my husband really helps facilitate that. When I was in Lansing, I was much more studio-bound. I found it harder to paint in the atmosphere of a bigger city."

Clark feels fortunate to have a gallery where she can display past works, reminders of where she has been as an artist. And where she is going.

"You always evolve as a painter," Clark said. "My style just evolved, it's not something I planned. I like the spontaneity of capturing something in one day, in heavy applications of paint.



Courtesy photo

Expressionist painter Brenda J. Clark, of Leland, shown painting "en plein air" to capture her emotional response to the Leelanau landscape.

"I love to be in the moment, and to complete a painting on location in the moment."

It seems falling temperatures and falling snow do not prohibit this painter from living, and creating, in the moment.

The Brenda J. Clark Gallery

is located at 110 N. Lake St., in Leland. Winter hours are by appointment. For more information or to arrange for a commission, please call 231-256-0026 or 231-256-9356. Enjoy a virtual tour of Clark's gallery at www.brendajclark.com.