Brush *with the Elements*

Carolyn Dover shares her approach to painting en plein air and the landscapes that inspire her

By Mackenzie Best

Howards Land Early Morning, 12" x 24", Oil on Canvas

For artist Carolyn Dover, the landscape is not simply a subject. It is a lifelong dialogue shaped by memory, place, and an intuitive response to the natural world. Based in Grimsby and working out of her studio at Hamilton's Cotton Factory, Dover has spent decades refining a practice rooted in en plein air painting. Her work balances direct observation with a deeper transformation, where experience and emotion quietly reshape what is seen.

“I always understood, from a very young age, that sketching and painting outside was as natural as studio work,” she says. Influenced early on by the Impressionists, Post Impressionists, and Canadian painters such as Emily Carr, Tom Thomson and The Group of Seven, Dover developed a lasting connection to working outdoors. What continues to draw her back is not just the subject itself, but the immersive nature of the process. “You are surrounded by your subject, the landscape, using all your skills to tame and interpret one small part of it.”

That immersion brings both challenge and clarity. Changing light, shifting weather, and the physicality of working on site demand a heightened awareness and decisiveness. “When I am faced with the adverse conditions outdoors, my execution becomes decisive and more visually insightful,” she explains. These smaller outdoor studies often become the foundation for larger studio works, where she expands her exploration of colour and form. In this transition, her compositions move beyond representation, becoming more distilled and expressive.

The Niagara and Hamilton region has been a constant source of inspiration throughout Dover’s life. Her connection to the landscape began in childhood, exploring the escarpment near her family home in Hamilton, and continues today from her vantage point in Grimsby. “The escarpment and bench lands of Niagara have enveloped my life. It is a comforting landscape of home with endless visual interpretations waiting to be discovered many times over.”

Beverly Swamp #1, 48" x 36", Oil on Canvas

Vineland Rows, 14" x 18", Oil on Canvas

From the ordered lines of vineyard rows to the dramatic rise of the escarpment, the region offers both structure and movement. These elements reveal themselves differently with each return. “The vineyards of Niagara provide unlimited, fascinating material for me. The orderly rows of grapevines reveal the subtle contours of the land.” While she continues to paint in places such as the Algonquin Highlands and the Maritimes, this landscape remains central to her identity as an artist.

Dover’s career has also been shaped by years of teaching, including her time

Burlington Bluffs #1, 45.5" x 58.5", Oil on Canvas

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at the Dundas Valley School of Art and the Art Gallery of Burlington. For her, teaching reinforced the principles that guide her own work. “Through teaching I was constantly reminded of the guiding principles of authentic artistic execution,” she says. At the heart of that philosophy is a commitment to individual voice. “I believe in always using your own voice, and embracing your own esthetic inclinations.”

There is a particular satisfaction in witnessing creative breakthroughs in others. “I would delight in that moment of recognition for a student, when all the instructions would fall into place and the light of creation would turn on.” These experiences, along with her work as a juror and workshop facilitator, have deepened her appreciation for how art connects to everyday life, offering new ways of seeing and understanding.

While landscape painting remains central to her practice, Dover has also explored still life and figurative work, often with symbolic undertones. Rather than separate pursuits, these disciplines are united by a shared approach. “They both contain a strong and essential element of authentic artistic vision,” she explains. Working from a physical subject allows her to capture a personal impression of a specific time and place, grounded in observation yet shaped by interpretation.

Her still life work, informed in part by an interest in Northern Renaissance painting, has provided a space to explore feminist themes, both historical and contemporary. Yet even within her landscapes, there is a continuity of expression. “There is an unapologetically feminine energy in my landscapes,” she notes, pointing to a sensibility that extends across her work.

At its core, Dover’s practice is about connection. Standing before a landscape, brush in hand, she is not seeking to capture a single element, but a convergence of experience. “It is light, emotion, and memory that I hope to capture,” she says. Light may first draw her in, but it is the emotional response that guides the painting forward. Memory also plays a role, both personal and collective, embedded in the land itself.

Beyond these elements lies something less defined. “That there may be something else entirely at play is that element to strive for,” she reflects. “It’s there when you can’t quite put your finger on why a painting speaks to you or moves you emotionally.”

In Dover’s work, the landscape becomes more than a representation. It is a reflection of inner experience and a quiet invitation to reconnect with the natural world. Through her paintings, she reminds us that the land is not only something we observe, but something we carry with us, shaping how we see and understand our place within it.

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