



# TIM LAWSON

**Since moving to Maine from Wyoming ten years ago, artist Tim Lawson has settled in—to winter, to Wyeth, and to wandering.**

BY CARL LITTLE

**O**N A LATE AFTERNOON in the middle of June, T. Allen “Tim” Lawson ushered a visitor through a small labyrinth of fenced-in gardens off a back road in Rockport, past a trampoline where children happily bounced, into his studio behind the family’s white clapboard house. The space was under maximum use as the painter prepared for a solo show at the Ten High Street gallery in Camden.



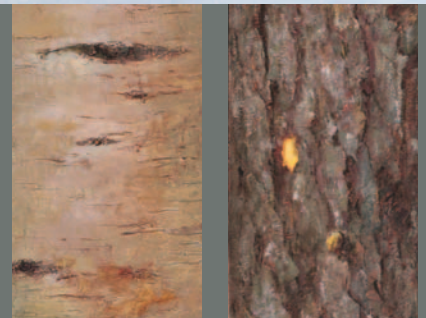
TOP LEFT: *The Guardian*, 2011, graphite on paper, 39 x 30.5"

TOP RIGHT: *January 16th*, 2011, oil on linen, 30 x 48"

BOTTOM LEFT: *Red Oak*, 2011, oil on linen, 30 x 12" and *Beech*, 2011, oil on linen, 30 x 8.75"

BOTTOM RIGHT: *Birch*, 2011, oil on linen, 30 x 5.25" and *Spruce*, 2011, oil on linen, 30 x 8"

## Of Bark and Barns



The floor was crowded. Easels around the high, darkish room held new work, including studies of tree bark, portraits of Maine barns, and a large drawing of an elegant white pine on Islesboro Island. Lawson moved a mock-up for a recessed-wood frame built by a local carpenter to one side. A framer from New York City who comes from a line of Old World gilders will do the finish work. The frame is one of several Lawson has designed to present a remarkable

new series of bark paintings, vertical representations of sections of trees painted from life.

Lawson became fascinated with bark some years ago while feeding the studio woodstove. Pieces of bark from the stove wood broke off in his hands. He began hanging sticks of firewood on a wall and using them as subjects for paintings. Today, a short length of spruce with holes made by a woodpecker stands on a stool next to an easel where its likeness is materializing on canvas.

Lawson finds that the more realistically he tries to paint bark, the more abstract the image becomes. He is aware of the range of colors present—



TOP: *Feathers to Feed*, 2011, oil on linen, 30 x 30"

TOP RIGHT: *Retired*, 2011, graphite on paper, 28 x 28.5"

BOTTOM RIGHT: *Early to Rise*, 2011, graphite on paper, 28.5 x 23"

the reds, oranges, grays, and violets—not just the brown most people claim to see. Images of red oak, white pine, and cankered beech, some with vivid lichen, create a striking line-up in his studio.

The artist has a special passion for the arboreal, having been brought up in Wyoming, where trees require special nurturing. “You plant trees with loving care,” he explained of his native state. “You water them, fence



them, wrap them, and you do a lot of praying they survive.” When he moved to Maine he was amazed to find the opposite situation: oak trees, for example, sprouting from a rock pile. “One would be hard pressed to prevent a tree from growing here,” he said.

In Maine, Lawson’s painting territory ranges from his property in Rockport to back roads across the state, where he is always on the lookout for a motif. Barns, like trees, are a special interest. Driving through Union on a wet, overcast, early spring day, he passed a chicken barn set back off Route 17. The façade seemed to be vibrating, but at first he couldn’t understand why. He searched for a “weird light source,” but found none. Then he realized that the corrugated tin siding was the cause of the undulating effect, and he set out to capture it.

He intended to simply render the subject, but the barn became more appealing the more he studied it. Among other things, he loved the off-center configuration of the windows. He also made a personal connection: As a keeper of chickens, he could picture someone cleaning out the barn, choking on hen dander, and then one day cutting a hole with tin snips to vent the upper floor.

“If you really start to look at these Maine buildings,” Lawson said, “they’re still alive. Not basically alive like we think of alive, but they get an addition on them or a new dormer will go in.”

As Lawson sketched the barn in Union, the owner, who was building a shed off one side of the structure,

told him that while it was indeed an old chicken barn, he had “got rid of those damn birds” and was using it to store feed for his cattle. The title of Lawson’s finished painting? *Feathers to Feed*.

A representational painter, Lawson nonetheless never tries to recreate his subject exactly. He moves things around, taking license with the elements of the scene. (The tree in *Feathers to Feed*, for example, is from “the next county.”) He is also more interested in trying to capture the feeling of a place, which is much more difficult a task than simply reproducing it. For that reason, and because decisions about composition, color, and other elements are not always obvious, he often lives with his paintings for quite a long time before completing them. “I’ll come in to the studio one day and say to myself, ‘You need a dark area over here’ or ‘You need some balance.’”

Turning to a painting that features the side of a weathered Maine house, Lawson explained how it took him four months to solve a problem related to the door and windows.

The circumstances of this particular canvas are special beyond technical concerns. Early on the morning of January 16, 2009, the painter received a call that Andrew Wyeth had died. He retreated to his studio, but found himself unable to focus. His



wife suggested he do something outside, so he got in his car and began to drive. He ended up at the Olson House in Cushing, site of some of Wyeth's best-known paintings.

Lawson had the place completely to himself. Sketchbook at hand, he made a few small studies of the house and took notes. He left when a film crew and several photographers showed up, but by then he had latched on to the motif. The resulting painting is a stunning study in gray and white—an homage to the painter whom Lawson admired so much.

Lawson enjoys working alongside other artists. The first painting he ever did in Maine was on Monhegan Island with Caleb Stone, a classmate from the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts. In 2003 he collaborated with the painter Geoff Parker on a special project to retrace the Lewis and Clark expedition; Parker has since come to Maine to paint. He has attended retreats at painter Don Demers's home in Ocean Point in East Boothbay and painted at Katahdin Lake during The Trust for Public Land's campaign to acquire it for Baxter State Park in 2006. "It benefits all artists to help one another," he said. "It raises the whole profession."

For the past five or six years, Lawson has also led a *plein air* painting workshop out of his home in Rockport. The two-week session starts with guidance about how to paint outdoors. In the second week students are more or less on their own, working toward an in-studio critique. Due to preparations for his show at Ten High Street, Lawson didn't offer the workshop this fall, but he plans to do it again in the future.

Asked about his favorite season, Lawson stated that if he had to get "technical," he'd answer, "the next one," but he admits that he likes winter best. He loves the snow, and that there tend to be fewer distractions at that time of year. He also has a preference for the soft light of overcast days in Maine—the gray hues and the humidity in the air—although when painting in Wyoming he embraced the hard, high, flat light of early morning there.

As Lawson and his family ski at Saddleback Mountain, he has gone on win-

ter painting expeditions in the Rangeley area. A snowed-in root cellar on a back road caught his eye on one trip, leading to a small oil of the subject. "Just a wonderful root cellar," the painter states, noting the circumstances—"a very sunny day, shadowed north side of the house"—and how he was drawn to the coolness of the snow against the white house.

Another recent work by Lawson shows a misty forest interior. The painting represents early spring when a lot of



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moisture is coming out of the ground, Lawson explained, before "old man winter" has released his grip—"and, man, did he have a tight one this year." It brings to mind some of the woodland views Eastman Johnson painted among the maple-sugaring camps in western Maine back in the 1860s.

Drawing has always been a part of Lawson's artistic process, but being able to study Andrew Wyeth's preparatory sketches at the Farnsworth Art Museum just down the road has inspired him to

draw more. Fittingly, that museum recently included nearly a dozen of Lawson's drawings in its annual "Four in Maine" exhibition (this year's show was tied to the statewide "Maine Drawing Project"). He borrowed several pieces he had given his children, who were initially a little hesitant to loan them. (When he suggested that it might be fun to see the pieces on display, one of them asked, "Will they give them back?") Lawson and his wife, Dorie, have two girls and two boys, the eldest of whom started at Camden Hills Regional High School this past September. The painter credits his wife with keeping the family organized.

Dorie, too, lives a creative life: She is author of the novel *Along Comes a Stranger*, the collection *Posterity: Letters of Great Americans to Their Children*, and a children's book, *Tex*, which came out this fall. She also manages a speaker agency that represents her father, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and author David McCullough.

"I think Dorie and I are perhaps the only people to have come to Maine to get more cosmopolitan," Lawson said with a smile. Wyoming, where they started their family, is larger than all the New England states put together but with only a half million residents.

Tim Lawson's first exposure to painting came as a competitive swimmer in the Amateur Athletic Union. In the summer he would travel to different Wyoming towns for meets and stay with families. He competed against the sons of Bob Barlow, an insurance salesman who had an art collection and also painted. He remembers sneaking into Barlow's studio and admiring the artwork. An elementary school art teacher, Nancy Buening, provided additional inspiration, instilling in Lawson a sense of the enriched life an artist might live. In the summer of eighth grade she invited him to show his work with hers in a small gallery on Main Street in Sheridan, Wyoming. He was 13 at the time and had produced, in his words, "some of the worst paintings that any man has ever created," but he sold several, which nudged him further toward a career as an artist.

Root Cellar, 2011, oil on linen, 26 x 24"

In high school, Lawson took every art course offered, twice. He later attended a small commercial design school in Dallas, Texas, but only briefly. “Completely lost” as to what it would take to become a fine artist, he took the advice of one of his professors and applied to the American Academy of Art in Chicago. He knew a couple of students there, including Mark Daley and Kang Cho, whose work he admired.

After three years in Chicago during which he concentrated on drawing and painting, Lawson was still unsure of his direction so he enrolled at the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts in Connecticut. There he found a core group of dedicated painters, including the aforementioned Caleb Stone. Students Tom and Peggy Root helped mentor him, as did professor Deane Keller, “a true magician,” who provided constructive critiques.


The title of Lawson’s exhibition at Ten High Street, “Growth Rings,” is fit-

ting, not only for the bark paintings, woodland interiors, and portraits of trees featured in the show, but also as a description of his evolution as an artist. In recent years he has found himself growing both outward and inward as a painter. While expanding his repertoire of subjects, he has been spending more time with each work.

Asked when he knows a work is finished, Lawson said with a smile, “Usually when the deadlines come.” He describes the rather frantic period when preparing for a show. In a recent conversation with fellow painter Jacob Collins, he learned he is not the only one who starts many paintings and is often driven to finish them only when a deadline looms. Both painters like the excitement and freedom of the initial work and often defer the fine-tuning until later.

When he started out as an artist almost 30 years ago, Lawson thought he knew quite a bit about painting. He was a *plein-air* painter, working outdoors,

and was fairly prolific. While he still does much of his painting from life, he paradoxically feels he knows less about his chosen art. “It takes me longer and longer to finish a work,” he said. If he lives long enough, Lawson joked, he could get to a point where he doesn’t “know a damn thing and I’ll never be able to finish another painting.”

With extraordinary new paintings and drawings circling the studio, it was difficult for a visitor to envision such a scenario. As Lawson once stated, the transition from painter to artist happens “when you cross the line of painting what you see to painting what you feel about what you see.” That line has been crossed: his images of Maine resonate with a profound sense of place that goes beyond the merely seen to the deeply experienced. 

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