

# A Painter's JOIE *de* VIVRE



PHOTO BY LAURA PEDRICK

BY PHIL GIANFICARO

**B**ill Jersey thinks about the future a lot. Like what he'll be doing a decade from now. When he turns 106. "I love painting so much that I feel that if my hands don't work any longer by then, I'll crawl to my easel across the floor and push the brush with my teeth," he says, with a laugh. "I think the day I wake up and can't paint, I'll just have someone shoot me. But seriously, painting is what I love. It keeps me going."

Until that day, Jersey, who has lived in Lambertville for the past 13 years, will continue standing on his two feet, putting brush to paint and paint to canvas, transferring the bucolic splendor of Bucks County and surrounding areas into an iridescent blast of colors and images that stir the emotions and evoke fresh perspectives.

Jersey's landscape paintings capture nature at its core: the feel of a tall, leafy tree shading a simple white farm house along a dusty country road while purple rolling hills stand watch in the distance; a windmill spinning at the bottom of a field of wheat as a blinding sun kisses the golden land below; beneath an apricot sky, a weathered wooden fence with a story to tell stretches in a country field as far as the eye and one's imagination can see.

Jersey's paintings transport the observer into the belly of nature, affording them the pleasure of feeling the warm, midday breeze as it rustles through the trees, perhaps sending perching birds on their way. It's nature unspoiled, the way it is meant to be experienced.

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"I like painting landscapes for many reasons," Jersey explains. "For example, trees allow you to put a branch where you want to place it; with people, arms belong where they belong. You're not as restricted with nature."

Jersey says he can thank his wife, Shirley, for providing the opportunity to paint Bucks County landscapes. A Midwest girl, she didn't care for living in Berkeley, California, where Jersey had set up a production company (Quest Productions) to be close to his first wife and their kids.

While Jersey was in London making a film, Shirley was on the East Coast, visiting their son at Princeton University and staying in Lambertville. One day, while walking along the Delaware Canal towpath, she came across a For Sale sign on a property she loved. She called her husband right away.

"I said if she liked it, buy it," Jersey recalls. "I've always had women running my life. Just seems easier that way."

Jersey's creative process is pretty consistent. He wakes up with the sun and ventures out and onto the backroads of the county in search of inspiration mainly from about 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. He drives along this country road, then that one. He strolls along a rustic path. Suddenly, he spies that glimmering nugget of gold. He examines the scene from different angles. He takes photographs. He returns home to his studio, props the photos beside his easel, and pours his talents onto the canvas.

"I'm always looking for shadows and light," says Jersey. "Next to the shadow there is always light. I love the contrast. To freeze the landscape, I take photos. I don't paint in nature anymore; I go back and paint at home. I do one or two a week. But it all starts by being outside."



Top: Jersey's "Autumn Onset." Bottom: "First Snowfall."

In recent years, Jersey has switched from working in fumes-emitting oil-based paints to acrylic. While the colors of acrylic are not as crisp as oils, he says, "My lungs can't take the oils anymore."

Jersey's paintings also steal the breath away from art lovers. During an exhibit last year at the Stover Mill Gallery in Pipersville, 47 of his 60 paintings sold in two days.



PHOTOS BY LAURA PEDRICK

*Above and below: Jersey takes photographs, returns home to his studio, props the photos beside his easel, and pours his talents onto the canvas.*

Jersey has long had an artistic bent. Armed with a degree from the prestigious University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts, he became an award-winning documentary filmmaker who worked throughout the world on more than 100 films, including those on former Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren and the history of Jim Crow in America. Among the honors he received are an Emmy, Peabody, DuPont, Columbia, Christopher, Gabriel, Cindy, and Cine Golden Eagle awards, and a two-time Academy Award nominee. He also served as art director for the 1958 science fiction cult classic, “The Blob,” which starred a then-unknown Steve McQueen and was filmed in Chester and Montgomery counties.

But perhaps the genesis of Jersey’s artistic talents were formed as a child in his native Jamaica, Queens, N.Y.

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“I grew up with Fundamentalist parents, and wasn’t allowed to do what other kids did,” he says. “So, I sat in my bedroom and drew pictures of ball-players to keep me amused.”

Owner of a wry sense of humor, Jersey delights in saying a bold lie is better than a timid truth. Truth is, his ability to paint, to move, to create, to inspire extends decades.

“I got a letter from a guy recently,” Jersey says. “He told me he had bought one of my paintings 50 years ago. Still has it on his wall. He said that painting inspired him to become a painter. And now, he’s also teaching painting. That’s the type thing that keeps me going.”

Today.

And, hopefully, 10 years from now. □

*Phil Gianficaro is an award-winning writer who has profiled Bucks County residents for nearly 30 years.*

