



The Art of Harry Tanner

**Harry Tanner in his studio**  
**with *Portrait of Becky* in the background**

This book is dedicated to the work and indeed, the life of Harry Tanner because he does very interesting paintings and he has had a very interesting life.

Front Cover: Babalawos, Egg yolk tempera

Back Cover: Promethian Still Life, Egg yolk tempera





# Harry Tanner:

## Royal Palms and Jack Pines

An appreciation by Gary Greenwood



**Cuban Country Scene finished in Toronto  
Enamel on copper,  
1985**

I met Harry Tanner in the late 1970's when I was president of the Canadian Artists Representation of Ontario (CARO). Harry was on one of his trips from Havana to Toronto to visit his parents, buy art supplies and advocate for the Cuban Artists Union (UNEAC). A meeting at a Bay Street coffee shop resulted in my writing an article for the CARO newspaper about this Cuban artist with the un-Cuban name, his passion for Cuba, its people and the heroes of the Cuban Revolution. Shortly thereafter, a Cuban vacation offered me the opportunity to spend two days with Harry in Havana. I met his daughter, Harsyl, who was performing in a magical play populated by children and giant puppets presented in a wonderful art deco theatre. In the evening I saw a contemporary Cuban play satirizing illegal renovations in La Habana Vieja. So far, the revolution looked good to me.

The next day, Harry took me to the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de La Habana—to see trees.

Starting at the top floor and walking down, Harry presented me with, what was for him, a key aesthetic indicator in the evolution, arguably, the revolution of Cuban art through the representation of the Royal Palm from earliest times to present. Harry's argument was that colonial depictions of the palms were copies of European tree species. The awkward Spanish trees persisted in Cuban art until native Cubans, who appreciated the chaotic gimbald-like fronds of the enormous Royal Palm that are able to survive the hurricane season in the Caribbean, got it right. I thought immediately of the liveliness of the Jack Pine painted by Tom Thomson and artists of Canada's Group of Seven who gained credence once the Brits put away their watercolours and went home. Harry had shown me a barometer of the changing political climate of Cuba through the work of artists and, most appropriately, the eyes of a Cuban who was also Canadian.

**Harry Tanner** was born in Preston, Mayari, Cuba in 1934 one year after his brother Charles. His father, also Charles, came to Cuba in the early 20's as an assistant manager of the Bank of Nova Scotia following the boom in sugar production that would irreversibly change Cuba. A few years after his arrival, Charles Tanner met his future wife, Dorothy Todd, an American who had lived in Cuba since she was 5 years old.

Harry's maternal grandparents had moved to Cuba with the promise of fresh tropical air and cheap land suitable for orange plantations. While his grandmother tended to the oranges in Herradura close to the Vinales Valley of southwest Cuba, her husband, a dentist, visited sugar refineries along the coast in his boat, a floating dental clinic, called El Dentista. Dorothy and her sister, Margaret, were born into a privileged environment. Cuba, divided between the ABC Community (American, British and Canadian) and the Cubans, was a rigid society under the iron fists of a succession of dictators. Nevertheless, Harry's parents, who descended from good country Indianans and Nova Scotian coal miners, related well to Cubans despite the cultural gap. This became a foundation for Harry's love and enthusiasm for Cuba and its people.

At the end of World War II, the family moved to Havana. Here, Harry's education continued at Miss Philip's School, which was notably bilingual, with classes in English in the morning and the same curriculum in Spanish in the afternoon, then at Candler College where it was all in English. Harry was gaining the means to involve himself in a broader and culturally richer Cuban society. To his dismay though, he was also recognizing a growing conflict between his life as a privileged "foreigner"—although born in Cuba—and the lives of the majority of Cuban people.

After graduation from Candler, Harry enrolled in Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia to begin a short-lived education in

medicine, which was soon replaced by studies in geology. More significantly though were Harry's extracurricular activities involving evenings as possibly the only white patron at Negro bars—Atlanta was racist and segregated at that time. It was also the era of McCarthyism. A Cuban-Canadian on campus who visited beer-joints and listened to black musicians and gave up his bus seat to elderly Negro women drew the attention of the immigration department, and then the FBI.

Despite some interest in the outdoor nature of his geology studies, Harry wasn't having a great time at Emory, so in his final year he returned to Havana. This was timely, Harry admits, since his conflicts around his place in Cuban culture were highlighted by his experience of racism and McCarthyism in the United States. He needed a rest, some help and a change before he could return to Emory, if ever.

### **Introduction to Art, Painting and Paris**

In Havana, Harry enrolled in painting classes taught by painter and art historian Palko Lukacs, a Hungarian graduate of the Vienna School of Art and student of the famed Austrian artist Oskar Kokoschka. Harry's first major contact with art was educational, enlightening and life-changing. Palko liberally sprinkled his classes with his own philosophical and historical perspectives and news from the literary and art world beyond Cuba. Palko was impressed enough with Harry's artistic development that he suggested to his father that Harry should go to Paris to study art. Amazingly, Harry's father agreed enthusiastically particularly because the Cuban revolution had begun to heat up and Paris seemed far safer than Havana.

Harry Tanner arrived in Paris in February 1957, and with Palko's advice enrolled in the classes of Andre Lhote at his school in Montparnasse. Palko had given him Max Doerner's book, *The Materials of the Artist and their Use in Painting*, an artist's handbook



**Sargento de Infanteria**  
Egg yolk tempera emulsion on board,  
1974



**Lieutenant of Calvary**  
Egg yolk tempera emulsion on board,  
1974

of materials, processes and techniques—a book that has a prominent place in Harry's present day studio. Not surprisingly, Harry's adoption of egg tempera emulsion, a medium that he uses to this day, began from his readings from Doerner's book. Egg emulsion is a splendid way to extend expensive pigments and was a most effective medium in the visually flat Cubist paintings the poor young artist was creating in Paris.

Paris became Harry's classroom. Informal classes in La Grande Chaumière, frequent visits to the Louvre, and café "tutorials" expanded Harry's knowledge of art and an awareness of his rapidly changing world. He regularly attended film screenings at the cinemateque where he met French New Wave filmmakers and this led to his early film work while in Paris. Not incidentally he met Cuban exiles, including Nicolas Guillen (soon to be the National Poet of Cuba), who were awaiting the success of Fidel Castro's rebels so they could return home and take part in the work of the revolution. Harry listened to it all, including Fidel Castro's shortwave broadcasts from his camps in the Sierra Maestra. (Even now, Harry is a shortwave radio enthusiast.) After eighteen months in Paris, Harry returned to Havana.

### **Revolutionary Havana**

The fighting was still under way when this naïve Cuban-Canadian returned to Havana with dreams of making a film documentary on the tyranny of Batista. Sadly, he found it a challenge to even wait for a late night bus in Havana without drawing the attention of police. A Canadian citizenship card and speaking tourist Spanish got Harry out of a few scrapes and some close calls.

In January 1959, with Batista fleeing the country, Harry now committed himself to being an active participant in the new cinema industry where he worked for twelve years, first as cameraman and then as a director of documentaries. One of the highlight of this twelve-year

career was working as Assistant Director for *I am Cuba* by Mikhail Kalatozov, the 1964 film that Martin Sorcerse re-discovered in 1993 provoking wide-spread acclaim and the re-release by Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola in 1995. Harry was a founding member of ICAIC—Instituto Cubano del Arte y la Industria Cinematográficos, an organization that would foster a golden age of Cuban cinema.

His work took him to sugar cane plantations, refineries, workers' collectives, farmers' co-operatives and in Harry's estimation, the most beautiful parts of Cuba. Harry had some impatience with the brittleness and inefficiencies of the new order that brought him into the first of a few conflicts with the infamous Cuban bureaucracy. With his film career effectively on hold—apart from a few roles as an American tourist in films such as *La Permuta* by Juan Carlos Tabio, Harry returned to art as his way to assert his viewpoint and to make a living. He became involved with the Cuban Artists Union (UNEAC), the organization that brokered public commission on behalf of its members. Since it wasn't a well-paying partnership, Harry successfully petitioned to work independently, becoming Cuba's first independent artist under socialism.

### **The Cuban Paintings**

Harry immersed himself in the imagery of the street and countryside around Havana with the persistent goal of promoting the values and goals of the revolution, adhering to the dictate of Marx and Engels that the artist engage himself as fully as possible in the revolution. Harry seemed convinced that art relieved of the elitism of the past was a route deeper into Cuban Culture.

Harry's Cuban paintings have two significant threads. Firstly, the content is unapologetically Cuban and revolutionary, pertaining to the people and the landscape. Secondly, they have a message—Cuba, its people and their revolution were to be celebrated. Some early work may appear





**Havana Street**  
**Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on board,**  
**1981**



**Above the Stores #2**  
**Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on board,**  
**1988**

propaganda-like with written slogans or simply attention-drawing titles juxtaposed with vivid local scenes or heroic portraits. Harry prefers to think of these as a form of advertisement that is ultimately educational. The subjects and their message remain clear and concise, an approach strongly influenced by Harry's training with highly skilled artists in the studios of Paris. His Marxist ideology tempered with Cuban humanism blended with the philosophy of Renaissance art to create art that is a profound aesthetic experience but with an overt and accessible theme—a balance between beauty and the "historia", the story.

Harry uses his finely drawn and infinitely glazed egg emulsion technique to depict a scene that is a montage of numerous experiences and instances of Harry's observation of that place and time. An example of this is *Babalawos*, one of Harry's favourite paintings that has a prominent place in his home.

It is estimated that 70% of Cubans are of African descent. Their place in Cuban culture remains special because they came from slavery and through necessity maintained unique religious beliefs and practices. Viewing *Babalawos* (front cover), a non-Cuban would correctly note that the home of the two subjects is literally a shrine bringing together the household gods of this Cuban culture. The scene is provocatively exotic for Harry Tanner, born into the ABC colony. Harry places an image of himself in this painting as he does in many others, a welcomed observer determining his role—observer or creator? The result is a reconciliation of the outsider who became an insider.

### **Home to Canada**

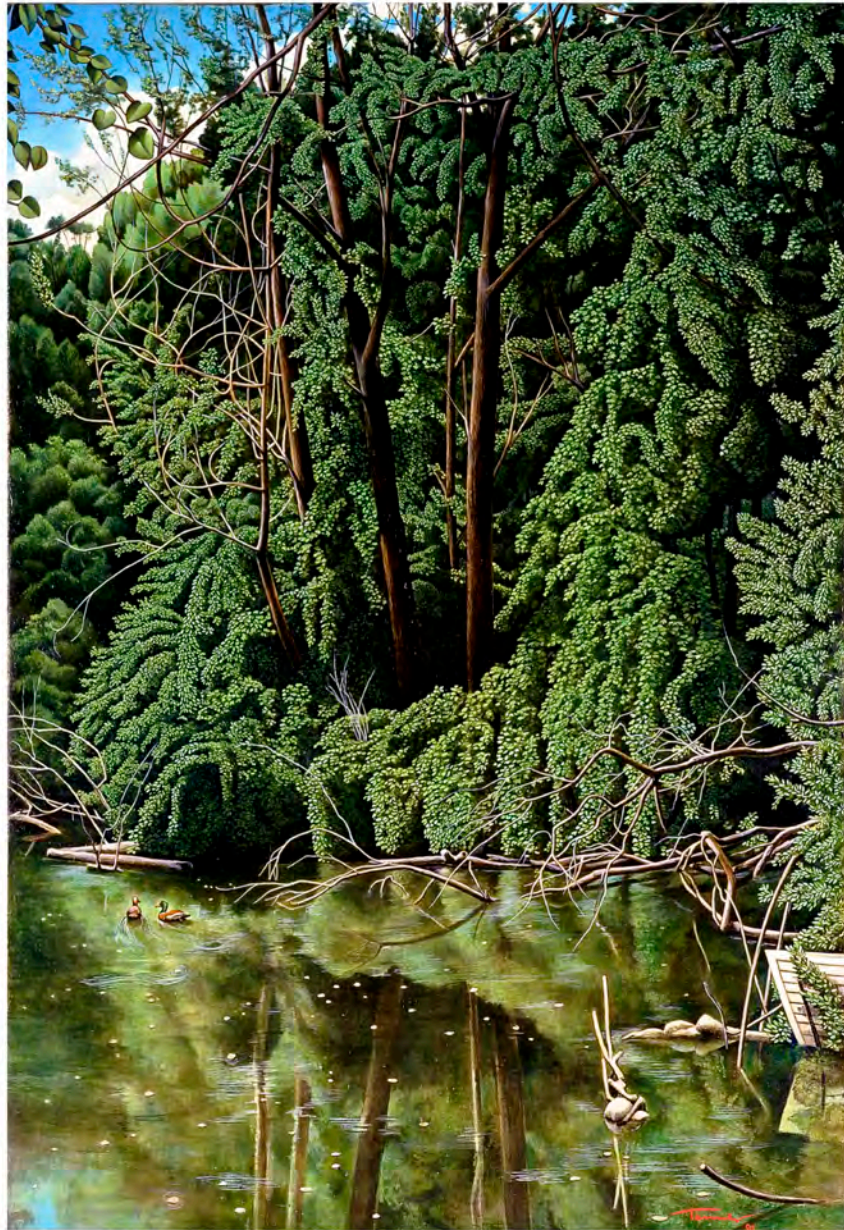
In 1983, Harry travelled home to Canada for what was to be an extended visit. Since Harry's family had moved to Canada after the revolution he was able to live with his mother in Etobicoke. His goal was to develop markets for his work while promoting Cuban artists and culture.

The Cuban government though had limited him to only a three-month exit visa. In this second major conflict with Cuban bureaucracy, Harry's petition to extend his stay to a realistic length was denied—and then accepted, but sadly, just days after he had overstayed the visa. In July 1985, Harry realized he wasn't going back to Cuba. Technically, he was now a defector. If he returned to Cuba, he might never be allowed to come back to Canada. If he stayed, there were veiled threats about losing his beloved Cuban citizenship.

Harry's first year in Canada, cycling daily to his studio on Markham Street above the Green Iguana, was emotionally and professionally stressful. He knew few people. His artwork didn't fit the current trends in Canadian art and he faced significant hurdles getting his work shown. Harry was a fifty-year old communist newcomer in the country named on his passport. Yet he made monumental art here—art that shared the principles of his Cuban work but posed questions that Harry rarely had to ask in Cuban society. From Harry's perspective, Canada appeared to be a country without a coherent culture, avoiding the clearly described political and social destinies inherent in revolutionary Cuba. His Canadian paintings were often critiques rather than celebrations. His paintings *Union Station* and *Eaton Centre* depict huge spaces echoing with urban noise, people enduring the iniquities of the place and their lives in it. Precisely describing the modern rapidly changing environment with awe, these Canadian paintings from downtown Toronto are restrained celebrations. No dancing in Canada.

### **The Canadian-Cuban**

Harry's most comfortable work in Canada is about local community presented in a manner that is similar to his paintings and enamels about life on Havana streets. My wife, Annemarie, and I are



**Toronto Ravine**  
**Glazed egg yolk tempera emulsion on canvas,**  
**2001**

privileged to own one of Harry's Toronto Streetscapes, *Above The Stores #2*, which I feel relates back to his Havana streetscapes, possibly *Havana Streets*. To a Torontonians, the storefronts with apartments above are definitely on Queen Street West but Harry would defy you to find the spot. He assembled this scene from a number of locations to enhance the composition. The pink flamingos in the window are Harry's, as is the newly-wed couple seen through the window a floor below. This painting was finished shortly after Harry Tanner married Becky Taylor in 1988.

Harry, now a resident of Canada, continues to reserve his artistic enthusiasm for places and people who are closest to him. His marriage to Becky Taylor was pivotal for him. He had found someone to love, and at the same time, found his Canadian community. His portrait of Becky is a stunningly sublime reflection of Harry's happiness with a hint of his persistent intrigues slightly offstage...who are those people in their backyard?

Harry continues his forty-year investigation and exploration of Baroque painting techniques. Unsatisfied with contemporary materials, Harry set out to discover exactly what it was that made Baroque paintings so beautiful while using a limited range of colours. A result is a paper called *Techniques of the Baroque* that presented his research and results in a way that is useful to today's artists. Based on techniques used by artists in the 1600's, Harry makes his own egg yolk tempera emulsion using sun-thickened linseed oils that he processes himself. He then applies colours as numerous thin glazes. He employs this painstaking but ultimately effective technique exclusively.

Harry and Becky live on a quiet street in well-established North Toronto. They regularly return to Havana to visit his daughter Harsyl, son-in law Omar and grandchildren Daniela and Alec. Harry's Toronto community is where he cultivates followers to energize his art, often

painting a part of Canadian society that is relatively free of the polymorphic mixmaster that is a capitalist democracy. But the Cuban connection persists. The greens of trees in his Toronto paintings are too bright and the foliage too dense to be Ontario ostrich ferns. His pond at the Riverdale Farm seems tropical and the pine trees on Cameron Lake in the Kawarthas appear hurricane-resistant. Harry is creating a bit of Cuba in Canada.

Gary Greenwood

April 17, 2012



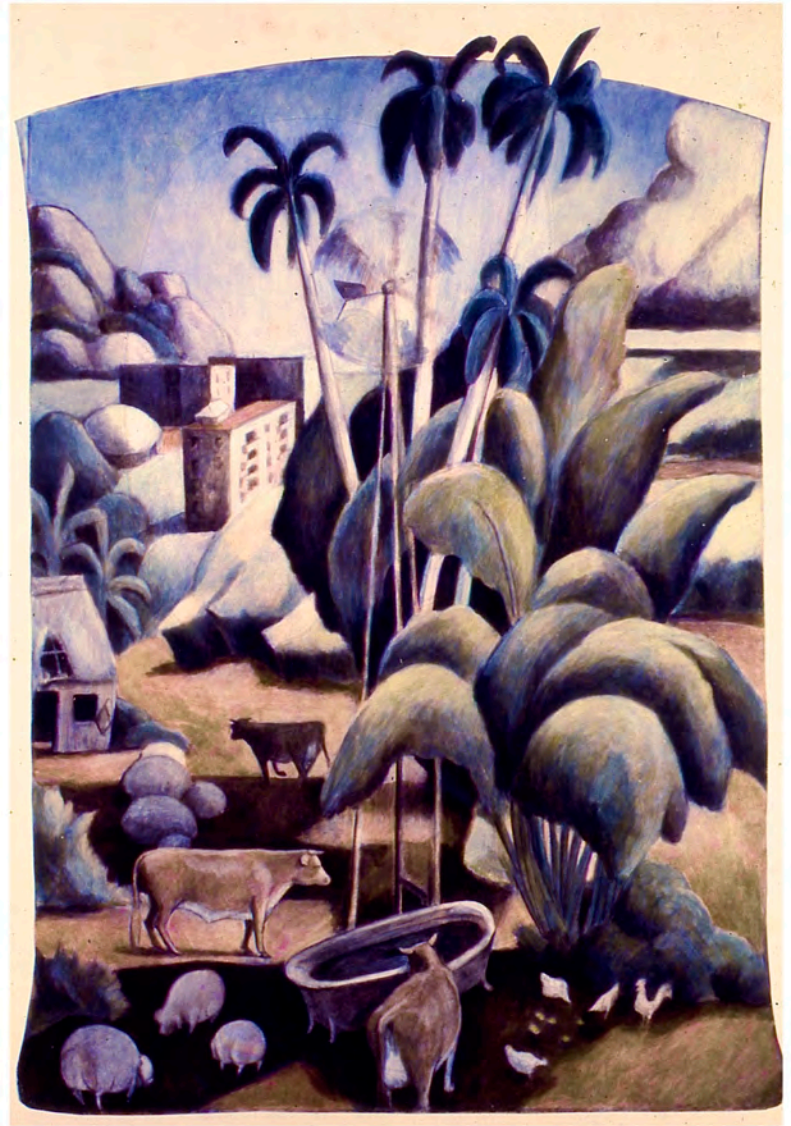
**Portrait of Becky (unfinished)**  
**Glazed egg yolk tempera emulsion on canvas**



**Drying Coffee Beans**  
Egg yolk tempera emulsion on board,  
1975



**Havana Downtown Parque Central**  
Egg yolk tempera emulsion on board,  
1973



**Cuban Countryside**  
Egg yolk tempera emulsion on board,  
1974



**Augusto Cesar Sandino**  
Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on board,  
1985



**Shooting of William Albert Charles Ryan**  
Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on canvas,  
1978





**Jose Marti**  
Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on board,  
1973



**La Ceiba.**  
Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on board,  
1973



**Salon Mamoncillo**  
Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on canvas,  
1984



**Decorating the Comite**  
Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on board,  
1981



**Llegaremos (We Shall Arrive)**  
Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on canvas,  
1982



**Development**  
Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on canvas,  
1983



**Sikan & Tanze**  
**Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on canvas,**  
**1985**



**Poundmaker**  
**Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on canvas,**  
**1987**



**Markham Street #3**  
**Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on canvas**  
**1985**



**Queen and Yonge**  
Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on canvas,  
1995



**Union Station**  
Egg yolk tempera emulsion on board,  
2010



**Fast Food Haven**  
Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on canvas,  
1990





**A Light at the End of the Tunnel**  
Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on board,  
1993



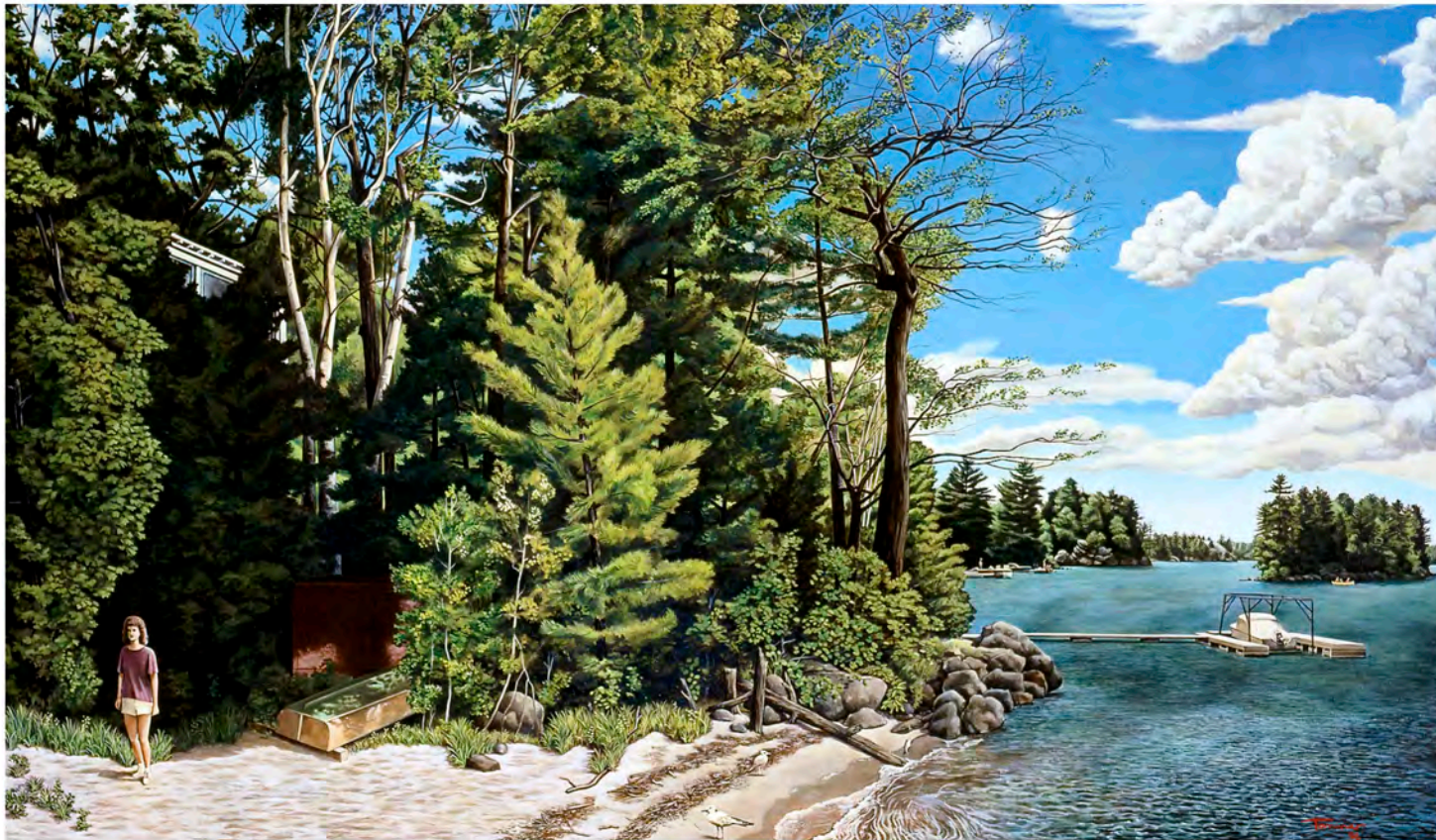
**Ontario Road**  
Glazed egg yolk tempera emulsion on board,  
1987



**The Messenger**  
Glazed egg yolk tempera emulsion on canvas,  
2001



**Promethian Still Life**  
Glazed egg yolk tempera emulsion on canvas,  
1996



**Muskoka Landscape**  
Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on canvas,  
1996



**Cameron Lake**  
Varnished egg yolk tempera emulsion on boiard,  
2007













Gary Greenwood is an Oshawa, Ontario photographer and artist. His work in the politics of art led him to a chance meeting with Harry Tanner. Since that time, Gary and Harry have been good friends. Gary married Annemarie Key in 1992. She shares friendships with Harry and his wife Becky and also the task of preparing this book. Many thanks to Annemarie for her numerous edits of the text. Gracias to Harry Tanner for allowing us to glimpse his life and work.

April 2012

