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DENNIS K. SMITH

STORY BY KAREN PATON-EVANS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN LIVIERO

The Artist Reveals the Uncommon in the Everyday

WORKING ON the line at the Chrysler Assembly Plant in Windsor for nearly 35 years, Dennis K. Smith didn't experience the tedium that some workers have while performing repetitive tasks. "All day, I would think about what I'd be painting when I got back home," he says.

Preferring the security of an autoworker's paycheck to the uncertainty of a career in art, Dennis made a conscious choice to leave art school as a young man after a summer working in the plant. Throughout adulthood, he juggled work with family life and time spent in his 9' x 6' home studio. "Because I worked at Chrysler, that gave me the opportunity to create my own art and follow my own flow," Dennis says. He felt great freedom, never obliged to please patrons or fill commercial orders to survive financially.

A chance to unite his day job and true passion arose when the plant held an art contest for a logo promoting the hiring of women and indigenous people. Dennis' entry won.

Approaching retirement from the plant over 13 years ago, Dennis prepared to immerse himself in his art by building a new home in LaSalle with a custom-designed, well-lit artist's studio and gallery in the basement.

His days are filled with happy activity, experimenting, producing his own pieces and teaching teens and adults to paint in his studio. "I am an encourager," says Dennis,





who is forever grateful to the many people who cheered him on as a child artist and during decades afterward.

As a black boy growing up in Harrow in the 1950s, becoming a professional artist never occurred to Dennis – even though “I had the best teachers for drawing from grade one up. They saw what I could do and encouraged me. They helped me find my voice.”

When local schools dropped art courses from the curriculum, the Harrow principal arranged for Dennis to attend W. D. Lowe High School in Windsor and take art classes with teacher Bert Weir.

Toronto beckoned after graduation, where Dennis studied Fine Art at the Ontario College of Art for a year. He recalls, “In the art history classes, no black artists were mentioned nor were their works visible.”

Years later, Dennis met a graduate of the college: Artis Lane, renowned sculptor and painter born in North Buxton, near Chatham. Artis’ later commissions include a bronze portrait of civil rights activist Rosa Parks for the Smithsonian Institution and a bust of Mary Ann Shadd Cary — abolitionist, teacher, newspaper publisher and Artis’ great-great aunt — installed in Chatham’s BME Freedom Park.

On opening night of the 1988 Affirmation Exhibit at Toronto’s York Quay Gallery, Dennis was one of the show’s participating artists; Artis was the featured guest artist. He remembers, “When she entered the room, it erupted with ▶

Clockwise from far left: Dennis K. Smith, Essex County artist, has found a lifetime of inspiration for his work in his own community. His subjects are part of the everyday, transformed by the artist from the ordinary into extraordinary; the young girl portrayed with a book in Dennis’ *Olivia* appears both thoughtful and forward-thinking; In *Onion Fields of LaSalle*, the artist honours the agricultural workers whose efforts bring in the bounty of the county; Fred Johnson, long-time farmer and friend of the artist, posed for Dennis’ painting, *Planting a Harvest*; growing up in a creative and musical family, Dennis reveals his love of song through paintings like *The Trumpeter* and *Sunday Afternoon at Elio’s*.





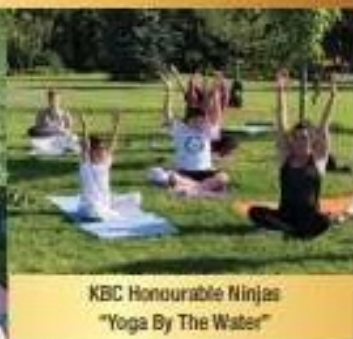
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applause. I thought to myself, 'Artis is a black artist making an impact in the field of visual arts.'" He was inspired. "In 2012, I was able to thank Artis personally for that milestone moment when my dream became a realization."

He shares that self-belief with other black artists, assuring "they can use art to express themselves and take it beyond their families' walls." Dennis is a co-founder of The Artists of Colour, a group comprised of black artists with the common mandate to speak boldly of their history through the visual and oral language of art. "We want to educate artists of the past and encourage artists now," Dennis explains. Ultimately, "it's not about being a black artist – it's about being an artist."

Colour in all its significance is represented in intriguing ways in Dennis' works. Eleven pen and ink sketches present a pictorial history of his childhood, shaped by being one of 12 siblings born to an artistic preacher and a musical mother who supported Dennis' dreams to be an artist. "The Harrow years were black and white years – simple times, playing on swings and in cardboard playhouses. A cardboard box was my best toy because I could be creative," he says. "I was very quiet; my words were jumbled up. That's probably why I started drawing. I could speak through my art."

"In the 1970s, colour came into my life." Dennis' artwork began jumping off the canvases with vibrant hues and dynamic movement that is evident even in his still life interpretations of fruit, musical instruments and landscapes. In his portraits and crowd scenes, Dennis infuses the unguarded faces and natural postures with energy, setting viewers into the heart of the moment.

One face in particular kept tugging at the artist's imagination for nearly 20 years. Driving past LaSalle fields, Dennis would see workers picking produce. He was struck by the sight of a farmer standing among the furrows and thought about the hope, determination and concern the man must feel as a food producer whose crops and livelihood are exposed to uncontrollable elements.

"I started doing print making and created Planting a Harvest, a linocut, in 1993," Dennis says. Its reddish, black and white tones reveal a farmer, face turned to the heavens as he stands in his field and beseeches God "to grant him strength to sow and reap a bountiful harvest."

While Dennis went on to produce ▶

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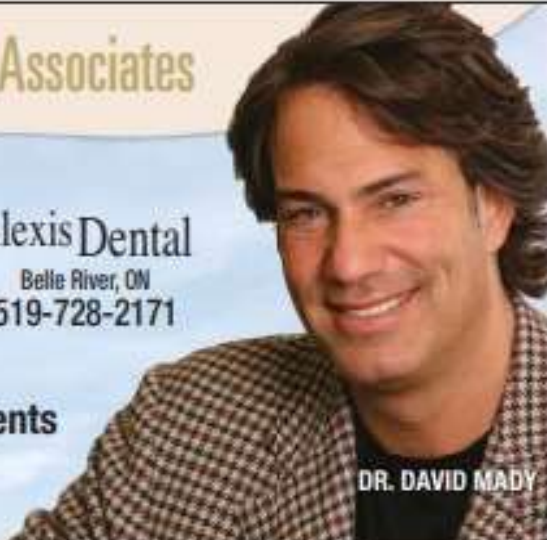
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many artworks in various mediums, the power of the faithful farmer stayed with him. When the artist was asked to paint a historical mural in Old Sandwich Town in 2002, Planting a Harvest provided the inspiration for the illustration of a former fugitive slave giving thanks for his new life before the Sandwich First Baptist Church, built by fugitive slaves in 1847.

Dennis was not yet done with the image of the hardworking farmer. Recalling his youthful summers toiling in Colchester South fields owned by Fred Johnson, Dennis asked his friend if he would be the model for a new painting in 2009. The kind, generous farmer posed, humble and hopeful, on the soil he still tilled. Fred saw the painting — acrylic on a large canvas — upon completion in 2011. Dennis's deft brush also set the farmer in another painting, Onion Fields of LaSalle. Fred died earlier this year at age 103.

Choosing everyday scenes for his subjects, Dennis believes, "Art is important because it changes people's view of the ordinary and changes it to extraordinary."

After marrying, Dennis went with his wife to her family's lakeside cottage. "I took my sketchbook and drew fungus growing on a tree. My new in-laws wondered why I focused on that when there was a beautiful lake in front of me. But I see beauty in ugliness," he says.

His works have been shown at The Royal Ontario Museum, the Canada-Japan Exchange Print Exhibition in Japan and various juried shows and exhibitions.

Enjoying telling stories through his paintings, Dennis was intrigued when the Canadian Mental Health Association, Windsor-Essex County Branch asked him to illustrate Ella Finds Lucky, a storybook that explores feelings after a loved one dies. Dennis connected to his childhood adventures, real and imagined, to draw the little girl and her elephant friend. Dennis also did the freehand drawings for the companion colouring book, Lucky's Journey.

To produce the storybook's illustrations, "I drew them by pencil first and then used a styling pen on computer. It was quite the learning curve!" Dennis chuckles.

Ever curious about the world he inhabits and open to new methods for expression, Dennis says, "My passion, my focus for art is painting my realities and leaving my record."

"I've been steady going with my art, even when I worked in the auto plant fulltime. There are still paintings that I want to get done."

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