Claudio D'Angelo: *A profile*

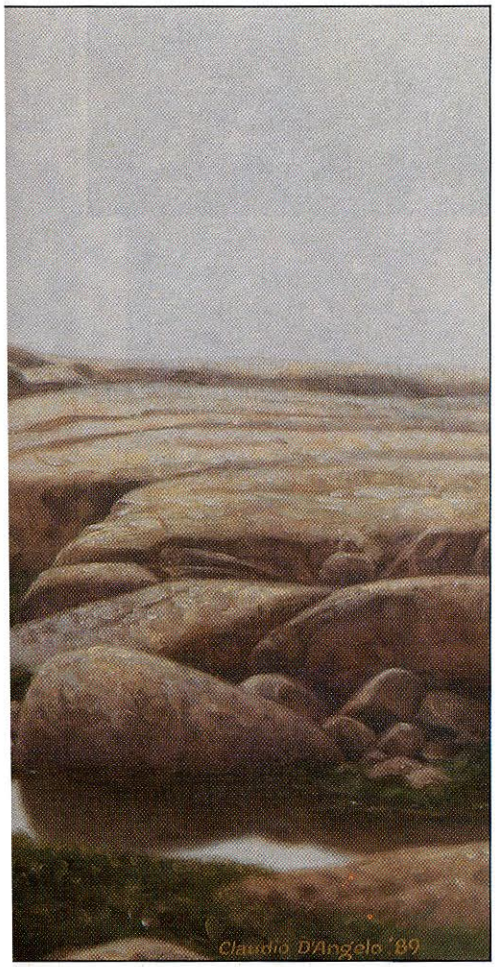
by Henry Lehmann

Today, at the age of 33, Claudio D'Angelo is on the brink of a major career as a painter of nature. The possibility of earning his living through art never consciously dawned on D'Angelo when he was a child. Drawing was simply something he did, as normal as playing was for most children. He remembers his mother plunking down large sheets of paper for him to draw on; he would spend hours tracing images while on the back balcony of the family's second story duplex in Montreal. And later, when the working-class family moved to a rural area north of Montreal, D'Angelo spent his summers roaming the fields looking for things to draw. Still, it wasn't till he was

Low Tide — Great Blue Heron — Oil — 1989 — 15" x 30"

a young man that he realized that his art was not one of those "childish things" the Bible admonishes us to put away when we grow up.

In high school, art was generally regarded as kid-stuff, a way to keep students busy. D'Angelo found art class an oddly dull place. "You had to follow the group; there was no leeway for personal initiative," explains D'Angelo. Only in biology class did the youth discover an outlet for his interests. Assignments included doing detailed drawings of animals. At one point, D'Angelo considered a career in zoology. But he gave up the idea because he wasn't strong in subjects like math and chemistry.



After graduating, D'Angelo knew roughly what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. He enrolled in commercial art at Dawson College in Montreal. This was in the early '70s, when Conceptual art was at its zenith and New York minimalist sculptor Donald Judd was king of the international art scene.

D'Angelo, however, was headed in a very different artistic direction. In a sense, the first part of his artistic evolution was characterized by maximum concern with the world of appearances. Dawson College trained D'Angelo well when it came to graphic skills; he learned how to render an object so that it looks three-dimensional and how to cast a perfect shadow. His final portfolio was bulging with ambitious design projects and illustrations.

But when he got his diploma and hit the streets in search of a job, the young artist was in for some disappointment. As D'Angelo puts it, "The hiring people at commercial art firms loved my stuff, but then they would ask me if I could do mechanicals or whatever — I didn't even know what they were talking about." D'Angelo had no idea just how specialized and isolated many of the tasks in commercial art can be. He also found that he had not been sufficiently educated in certain basics, such as how to do lettra-set properly, a deceptively difficult task.

His first job, at Arnott and Rogers, a downtown commercial photo studio, was an eye opener. He did covers and layouts in an environment which he likens to an assembly line. Among other things, he had to spend a lot of time drawing pictures of light fixtures. After eight months, he realized that he wasn't going anywhere in this job. He quit and set out to freelance.

Soon he was hired by Anderson Advertising, then located in Montreal's charming Youville Stables. Here, he was put to work illustrating trade manuals. They chose "my services because I was young, cheap and pretty good," explains D'Angelo. He drew pictures of forklifts and bulldozers, a far cry from the fish in the family aquarium he used to draw as a kid. Nevertheless, he found the work engrossing.

He also discovered the tyranny of time in commercial art. "Every day was like a speed contest," says D'Angelo. "You had an hour or so to do this or that, and then your art director would be hovering behind you waiting for the finished drawings." At Anderson Advertizing the main art tool was the magic marker, the tool that squeaks like some kind of eery mechanical bird.

D'Angelo worked in this artistic pressure cooker for almost five years. But when he got home in the evenings, he was not content just to turn on the TV and watch Wild Kingdom. All along, he continued to paint and draw animals. He also focussed on people and landscapes. His preferred media were oil and watercolour. And when he was too tired to paint, he thumbed through art magazines like Arts Canada, Art News and Southwest Art. He was especially fond of Andrew Wyeths's artistic vision. "I liked his crisp realism which at the same time exuded something more," says D'Angelo. Today he is less enthralled with Wyeth's "magic realism" and more in love with the subtleties of John Singer Sargent's lesser known landscape scenes.

D'Angelo was well liked at Anderson, and it appeared that he was destined for promotion to a good position at their head office in Toronto. But the young artist found the prospect of success and security strangely terrifying. "If I went to Toronto, I knew I'd drop everything else." In short, he saw that the price of success would be the sacrifice of his true interest in nature art; the work he was doing at home on his own time was what really mattered to him. The commercial art had merely been a way to fill time and, of course, to make a living.

Now, at the age of 24, it was time to confront himself and find out what he could really do. What kind of art would he come up with once he was free from commercial assignments and had all the time he needed? D'Angelo had been carefully saving his money. With enough to go a year without working, the young man quit his job and laid in a large supply of art materials in his Montreal apartment-studio. But when the year was over, much of the cache

Under a Winter Moon — Oil — 1988 — 26" x 33"

remained untouched. "I just wasn't ready to discipline myself; I dilly-dallied away the year," admits D'Angelo. However, the period of idleness probably was not a dead loss; young artists and writers on the brink of maturity often seem to need a stretch of "wasted" time in which to evolve mentally and spiritually.

D'Angelo's period of artistic hibernation was ended by a phone call. It was from the Cast shipping company. In the early '80s they were launching a series of nine new ships, each to be named after a Canadian animal. Cast wondered if D'Angelo would be able to paint a picture of each of the emblem animals.

Before the company could commission D'Angelo to do the whole series, he was required to execute one picture. This would be the test. For this trial project, D'Angelo was asked to create the image of a caribou — if accepted, this image would adorn the captain's quarters aboard a ship to be named Cast-Caribou, and D'Angelo would be given the go ahead to produce works for the other ships.

D'Angelo spent time at the Granby Zoo observing captive caribou. His first picture passed the "test," and the artist's dilly-dallying days were abruptly ended. There is no way to take a leisurely cruise through a commercial art project. D'Angelo was back to the bracing regimen of strict deadlines and requirements. Above all, the animal had to be very large and prominently located in the composition. Cast was not interested in images that emphasized the animal's ability to camouflage itself. Unfortunately, these images are not available to the general public because most of them are now in the Cast offices in Montreal and Switzerland.

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This project brought D'Angelo back into the world of commercial art, but it also pointed the way out. It gave him back a sense of discipline while allowing him to do all the work at home in his studio rather than in the hectic drafting room of a large company. And as a spin-off from his involvement in this project, he made important contacts

with people who collect nature art. As the ships were being launched over a period of years, D'Angelo's career as an independent nature artist was getting off the ground. Backed up by the work he had done for Cast, the artist could now confidently negotiate with clients.

One of the first people to take notice of D'Angelo's talent was a Montreal investment banker, David Lank. Soon, other commissions followed. D'Angelo, who now charges up to $6,000 for a large oil, does not draw up a contract with his clients. He simply decides for himself whether a person is serious or not. In most cases, D'Angelo is given free reign to create any image of nature he wants. But D'Angelo does not do portraits of pets. Someone hoping to have his darling pooch immortalized in paint will have to look elsewhere. D'Angelo is not currently represented by a gallery and sells directly from his studio. People discover him through articles and word of mouth.

A casual scan of work done by D'Angelo over a period of years shows a steady movement away from detail. "In my earlier days, I thought if I worked hard enough and put in enough detail, I would get a convincing image. But, then I began looking at really good art in which there were very wide brush strokes, and I understood that lots of tiny brushstrokes did not necessarily equate quality," says D'Angelo. He goes on to explain that his slightly looser approach has lost him some customers who persist in believing that the artist's main role is to impress the viewer with intricate detail. D'Angelo's artistic development has had to do with finding a careful balance between precise observation and overall impression.

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Perhaps the most striking thing about D'Angelo's recent works is the way subject and background are carefully interwoven. Brought to mind is Bateman with a touch of Catesby. In an oil entitled "Wary Grouse," the natural setting for the bird is not a "stage." Rather, it is an extension of the animal, or more precisely, the bird is an outgrowth of its environment. We are made to feel that in the distant past this brown mottled creature was created by the same fundamental process that shaped the ferns, lichens and stones in which it is visually embedded. Indeed, in D'Angelo's compositions, the surroundings occupy a large part of the space. Most of D'Angelo's images can be described as landscapes; the animals are visually subservient to the whole.

"I have no great urge to travel," declares D'Angelo. "If I go somewhere far away and draw animals, I'm not doing the animals justice. I have to have a real feel for specific habitats." Unlike Delacroix who revelled in the exotic and painted tigers he'd never seen in the wild, D'Angelo stays close to the flora and fauna he knows best. Most of D'Angelo's natural subjects live in and around Montreal and southern Quebec. D'Angelo sometimes travels to the parks in northern Quebec. But more often, he goes to Montreal's mountain or to wooded areas just outside of town, like the grounds around MacDonald College. Armed with binoculars and a sketch book, he makes notations of the animals he sees. He also frequents Granby Zoo, preferring to visit after

Gulls and Mink — Oil — 1985 — 19½" x 32"

Saw-whet Owl — Oil — 1987 — 20" x 16"

hours when the birds seem to be more animated. Friendly curators let the artist in. Recently D'Angelo moved from Montreal to a wooded suburb. Here, from the doorstep of his own studio, he does some of his best nature-watching.

D'Angelo brings the sketches and memories of his outdoor excursions back to the studio for contemplation. A final oil painting is the end product of a long process of translating sketches into complete scenes and matching anatomy with topography. Slowly the fragments of nature captured in individual sketches are brought into relation with each other or discarded.

An occasional trip to the refrigerator helps him refresh his memory. Like Audubon, D'Angelo keeps dead specimens on hand. D'Angelo doesn't actually hunt or kill wildlife. He finds dead animal bodies on roadsides. These corpses, which are extremely useful, are examined for details of markings and patterns of feather positions. And they can be taken outside to see exactly how they look when placed in natural light at different times of day. Each species of bird has its own body texture and reflects light in its own way.

D'Angelo also uses photos he takes of animals, but he is wary of this medium. He finds that the light reproduced in a photo often has little resemblance to the real exterior illumination. And in the last three years, the artist has begun taking brushes and oils along on expeditions. He quickly paints things that interest him on small panels of masonite. Later, back at the studio, these images serve as studies for some of the larger pieces that he creates entirely indoors.

D'Angelo always attempts to use settings that are biologically accurate; he would never put a fox next to a palm tree. Nor would he put a Victorian couch in the middle of the jungle, as did that most famous of zoo lovers, the 19th-century naive painter, Henri Rousseau. But D'Angelo does not hesitate to rearrange the rocks and trees in a given picture to attain a better composition.

"Gulls and Mink," painted by D'Angelo in '85, is one of the artist's most daring attempts to relate nature to the land and, at the same time, to show nature in movement. While a picture by D'Angelo like "Wary Grouse" is a scene in which time stands tensely still, "Gulls and Mink" is a tableau in which stillness has turned into action. The element of temporality is crucial to nature art, an art form which is so intimately linked with biological rhythms.

In "Gulls," we arrive on the scene just seconds after a mink has plucked a small fish from the sea. The little animal scrambles over the rocks, trying to get to shelter before the gulls flying around him can grab the fish for themselves. D'Angelo's picture depicts a spectacle that will disturb anyone who believes that nature is all niceness. D'Angelo's creatures have nothing in common with Bambi.

In "Gulls" life feeds on life, and big creatures devour little creatures. This is not a picture in which animals are given "character." Rather, it is, among other things, a portrait of natural hunger and the ceaseless drive to find biological satisfaction. Thoreau, the man who saw God in nature, would have appreciated D'Angelo's vision of predatory life-forces.

The different trajectories in the picture — the circular swooping pattern of the gulls and the straight line of the get-away of the mink — suggest an invisible geometric pattern, an abstract Platonic sculpture somewhat reminiscent of the planetary system and its orbits. Everything in the composition is calculated with the precision of a Swiss clock. There is a predetermined quality to the movement in this natural "dance" of life and death.

Equally striking in "Gull" is how living and inert matter are tied together visually by the repetition of certain simple contours. The dusky, wavy back of the mink moving towards the left edge of the picture is echoed in round, dark stones looming up from the bottom of the composition.

We are almost overwhelmed by D'Angelo's ability to orchestrate a diversity of objects. In his world, nature may not be kind, but all is in its preordained place. His nature is characterized by an order and ultimate

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rightness that humans, with their messy, neurotic lives, can only envy.

We are increasingly aware of how closely our genes resemble those of beasts presumably much lower on the "chain of being." Yet, as it becomes clear just how biologically close we are to wild animals, it also is becoming frighteningly evident that humankind is alone, staring at the ordered natural world across a vast chasm. As the late writer Joseph Campbell once said, "Animals don't tell lies." Only people are able to reshape reality, to lie or to create. This ability is what makes people both bad and good — and at times, like artists, almost divine.

Perhaps the supreme task of the nature artist is to express the intractable purity and "truthfulness" of animals. We will never return to Eden, but we can look over the fence and glimpse the strange things that still live there.

In the Middle Ages, nature was often seen as having superior magic properties. During the Renaissance, the balance of power tilted away from the natural world, and animals were viewed as lower links in a chain leading up to human-kind. Later on, the Romantics conceived of nature as an animating force uniting all living things, humans included. Today, we are beginning to see nature as something familiar, yet alien. We are not lords over nature, and nature does not rule us; rather, we sit uneasily side by side, physically close, yet somehow increasingly distant.

D'Angelo, whose approach to nature is part romantic and part scientific, begins to dramatize this vast gulf in an image like "Saw-whet Owl." The animal is not caught in a complicated artistic composition, itself a form of human fabrication. The lovely bird, sitting in the center of the picture, looks us squarely in the eye. But this owl displays no recognizable emotion. It's this unknowability that makes the owl so powerful a presence.