

BY ART LEE

# THE STORY UNTOLD

GALEN MERCER HAS MASTERED THE ART OF SUBTRACTION.

*The Barn Fire, Oil on Canvas, 30" x 40", 1988*

Artist's comments: "A conflagration consumed an old, three-story barn in a neighbouring field. High winds that night drifted embers to the roof of my studio, ultimately drawing another crew of firemen to hose it down."

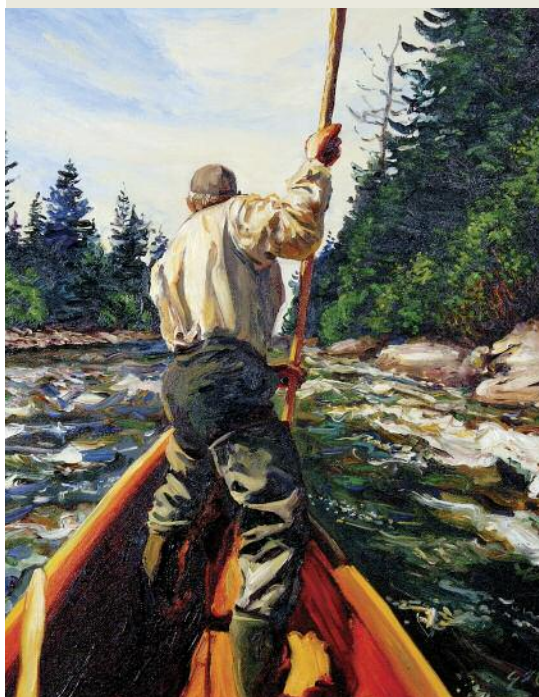


## I RECENTLY SAW A PHYSICIAN WHO IS ALSO AN ACCOMPLISHED PAINTER AND PIANIST, AND WHEN THE

name Galen Mercer came up, he said, "Oh, Galen is a brilliant painter." Similar comments are common whether those to whom you speak paint, fish or have been collecting Galen's work in the long or short term. Yours truly is especially fortunate, as my relationship with this extraordinary artist and angler dates way back to his school days when we met by mail, some time before we actually met in person.

Galen wrote me fascinating letters from his hometown, Toronto, where he also attended art school, each one accompanied by a fly he'd dressed and/or a small drawing, most of which I still have—and treasure. The first, I remember, was a beautiful pencil rendering of a single ruffed grouse body feather, followed some time later by a portrait of me in waxed pencil that to this day hangs in the main hallway of our home. Looking at it closely again today, I recognized that it, indeed, portended much of what was to come in decades thereafter.

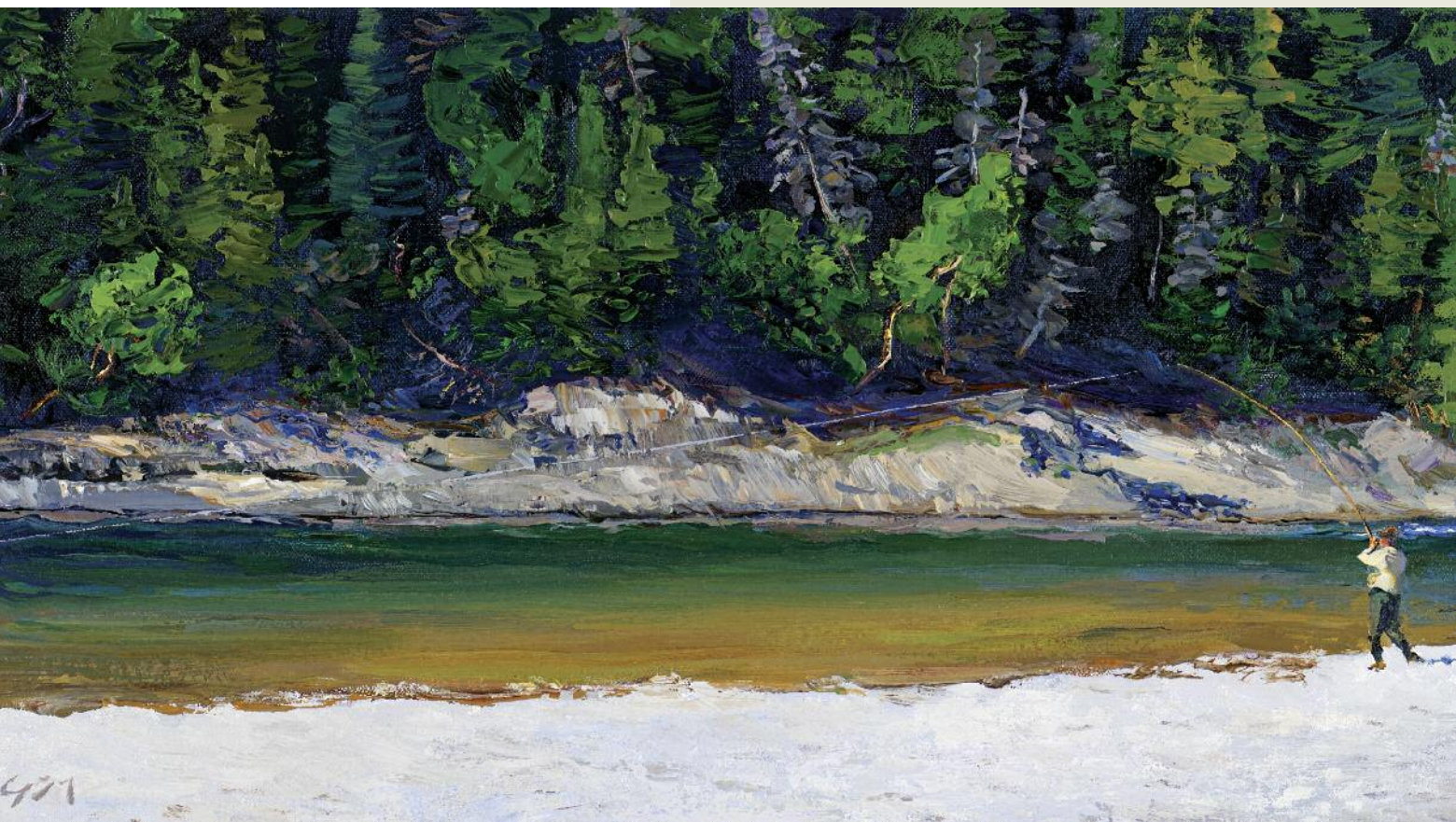
We did meet, of course, and what followed was a relationship, both personal and professional, that neither my wife Kris, a fine photographer,



▲ *Gaspé Guide*, Oil on Panel, 16" x 19", 2003

Artist's comments: "With one of the greats, Arsene Dugas, running the entire Ste. Anne, merely for pleasure."

► *Salmon Ascending a Falls*, Oil on Canvas, 20" x 30", 2012

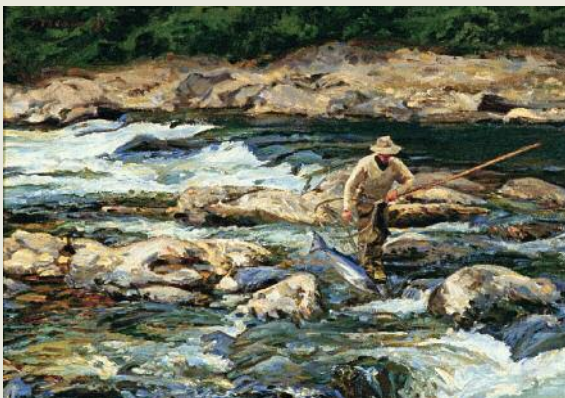






◀ **The Stand, Oil on Canvas, 10.5" x 20.5", 2013**

Artist's comments: "At Cold Spring Camp on the Matapedia. One of the world's great wading pools—I learned most of what I know about stealth and low-water tactics here. We'd arrive at dawn, or just as dusk began, and you'd literally see tails coming up, one after another, across this great shelving riffle."



▲ **Richard At Richard's Pool, Oil on Panel, 12.5" x 18", 1997**

I hope you agree, and I, the scribbler, wouldn't trade for anything. It also led to a warm relationship with his family, including his father, the late Glenn Mercer, and his two grandfathers, all fine watercolorists.

I was also lucky enough to be with Galen when he caught his first salmon—from Cullen Rock Pool on the Matapedia on a number-two Reduced Ackroyd—and to be able to call him "fishing partner" for decades, as well as to observe him painting, both *en plein air* and the studio where he worked in the Catskills, before he met and married his darlin' Jaimie and moved on to studios elsewhere.

Although he continues to paint in the Catskills, and with his evolving style, vision and growing oeuvre, the Florida Keys, New York City, as well as interesting and exotic foods, I've had less chance to *kibitz*, for certain, but no less to observe, and delight in his obvious growth so clear in the sampling of these works, that my words can't do justice.

But in some ways, too, the more things change, the more they remain the same. With regards what one might term "salmon scenes," for lack of a better term, Galen has clearly always sought inference and association, as opposed to fact and specificity, preferring to plant an idea that will,





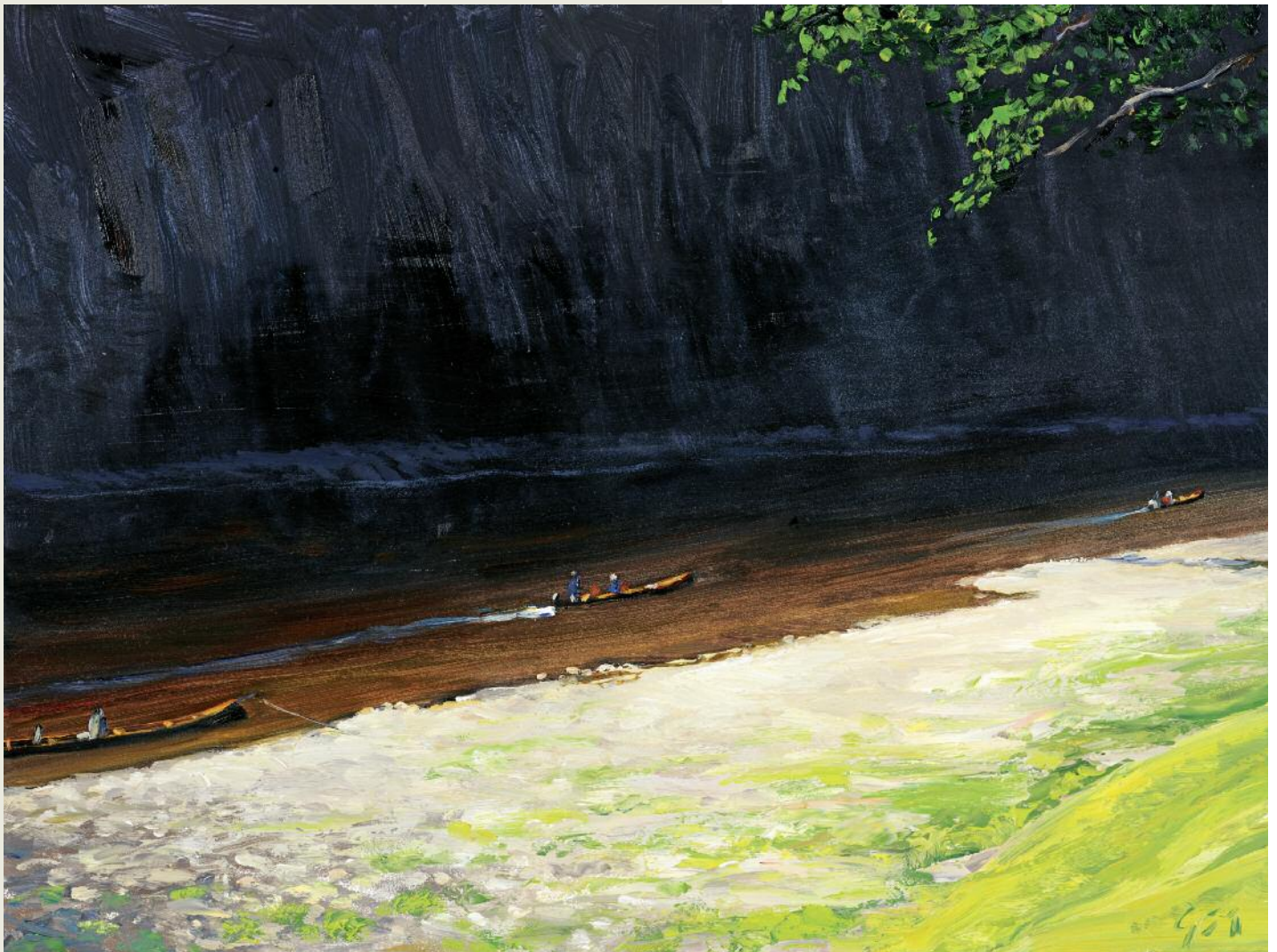
▲ *Winter Shadows, Chelsea*, Oil on Canvas, 18" x 18", 2012

▼ *Heading Up - Ristigouche*, Oil on Panel, 12" x 16", 2010

Artist's comments: "Since I was a kid, I've been fascinated by the blue gas contrails of outboard engines. There's the slightly sad suggestion of things disappearing."

in his words, "hopefully delight the eye and engage the mind, that is, stay with the viewer long after viewing." He notes he is not a "journalist or storyteller," and so if one is seeking specificity, as in the close-up of an angler casting or playing a fish, he, or she, would do better to look elsewhere.

"If there is a narrative in my work, it is usually the story untold, evolving or as yet undecided," he said recently. "The overly detailed is too often essentially lifeless, and so I try to eliminate extraneous detail, generally opting for mood over action, so the potential experience is not limited." Indeed, should people appear in his salmon waterscapes, or in others, structures such as a magnificent barn conflagration he painted decades ago, they are there only by way of providing scale. Similarly, on the Matapedia one spring, we happened to know the angler in the boat well below us was the famous writer George Plimpton, but Galen chose to paint our pool bathed in light and relegate the late author's Gaspé boat downstream to a suggestion.







▲ *In Salmon Camp*, Oil on Canvas, 26" x 36", 2008

Artist's comments: "I wanted to capture that lassitude, the drifting, and pleasurable weariness that attends the end of a fishing session. I'd never seen this painted before."



▲ *Binned Garlic*, Oil on Canvas, 14" x 18", 2007

Nor has Galen ever feared the challenge of subject or perspective. In one, of which I'm particularly fond, where a guide is poling downstream, Galen opts to paint the guide from behind, rare for an artist and difficult to execute successfully in the extreme, but essential in this instance to bringing greater attention to the rapids down through which the guide is maneuvering the boat. Similarly, in another favorite of mine, few would not guess the guide holding a salmon by the "wrist" is none other than Richard Adams, but Galen chose, not only to deep-shadow his face, but also to leave out his sport entirely, sequestering attention to the fish and the luminosity of oncoming nightfall on the river behind him. As a result, the painting in my view has a resonance that will remain with me forever.

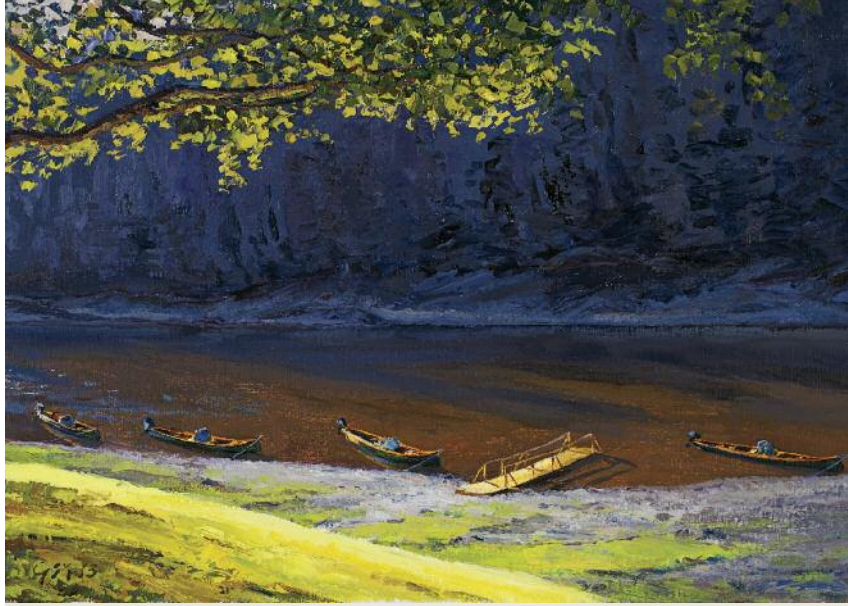
Coming from a family of watercolorists, Galen has often said he prefers oils "for their heft and viscous, plastic nature." He absolutely insists this is rooted in "the unalloyed pleasure of playing in a mud hole behind my Toronto home as a kid." Oils allow the artist to revel in the unexpected, he notes, offering a vast potential for handling, from seeking sensation as in the almost sculptural impasto of Adolphe Monticelli, a 19th century



still-life specialist, to the nuances of washes and glazes of James Whistler, probably best known for his “Nocturnes”. Whistler, by the way, referred to the consistency of his paint as “soup.”

As to style, Galen has long sought to achieve his ends through what he calls “subtraction,” winnowing influences, avoiding the trite or cliché at all costs, and recognizing the distinctive and what comes most naturally to a piece. “I seek never to let a painting calcify, which can happen with a single stroke. Then in the end, I feel that my best stuff happens when I’ve worked my way through the daily apprehension of applying paint, to arrive at unawareness—my personal short-hand. So days in the field or studio can feel like hours, even minutes, on those occasions when everything somehow seems to happen right.” 🐟

It would be an understatement to say Art Lee is a regular *Journal* contributor. He is more of a fixture, and a very valued one at that.



▲ **Gaspé Salmon Boats, Oil on Canvas, 13.5" x 18.5", 2013**

Artist's comments: "The poise of a salmon camp at dawn, broken occasionally by kitchen noise and tackle preparations."

▼ **Coming Down Late, Oil on Canvas, 24" x 30", 2008**

