



*Steven Rhude*

## EMMA BUTLER GALLERY

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Cover image: Dory at Mad Rocks, 38" x 41", oil on canvas, 2024

*Steven Rhude*

***Avalon: Short Stories in Paint***

August 24th to September 7th, 2024

***“There is no such thing as passive vision... only active envisioning, that is, the creative construction of a vision from a certain perceptual perspective.”***  
***- Donald Kuspit***



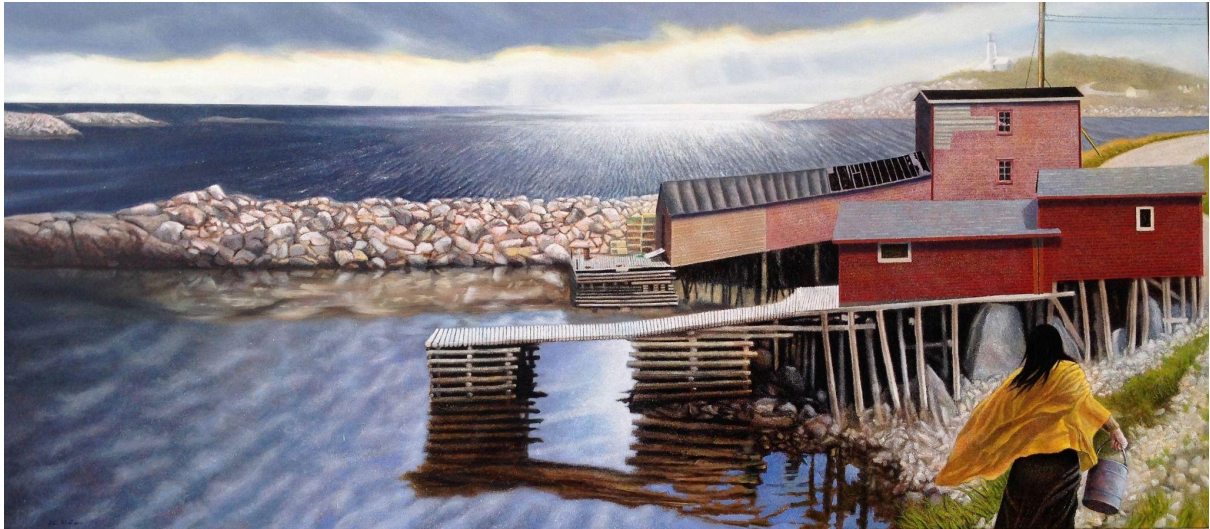
## *STEVEN RHUDE*

Steven Rhude was born in Rouyn Noranda, Quebec in 1959. His father was a Royal Canadian Air Force Pilot and travelled extensively throughout Canada before settling his family in Scarborough, Ontario. In Scarborough, Steven was raised, educated and studied civil engineering at Centennial College. After one year he switched to the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto where he studied fine arts and graduated in 1983 with honours in drawing and painting.

Steven also attended the college's off campus program in Florence, Italy for one year which included an intensive study of the Italian and Northern European renaissance. This year of study was made possible by receiving the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation award.

In 1990, Steven began to devote himself to drawing and painting full time. He and Simone Labuschagne, his wife, moved to Fox Island Main, Guysborough, County, Nova Scotia. It was there, in relative isolation, that Rhude developed the realistic and colourful style he is known for today. Art critic Elissa Barnard stated that in his work "Rhude has grappled with and further developed his subject matter, maintaining his engaging style but deepening his ideas and calling on the viewer to put more thought into the work and the plight of coastal communities in Atlantic Canada."

Recently Rhude has been part of two major provincial shows at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia highlighting contemporary artists: "Capture, 2014", a Survey of Realism, and in 2016, "Terroir", a survey of contemporary Nova Scotian Art. His work can be found in numerous private, public and corporate collections around the world. Steven's work has been reproduced in various publications, including The Newfoundland Quarterly, on the cover and inside the 2009 book "from Land and Sea - Nova Scotia's Contemporary Landscape Artists", and the 2010 coffee table book "A Place Called Away - Steven Rhude, Living and Painting in Nova Scotia."



### Essay: Simone Labuschagne

The journey to foreign lands has long been the *modus operandi* for countless painters, the objectives divergent with each situation. Some artists travel great distances for inspiration and historical study, while others remain within their own country exploring province and region. Conceptually, it's why Edward Hopper went to France to study in his early years of development, tugging at the coat strings of the impressionists, and how Allegheny, Pennsylvania born Mary Cassat, only began to live after ending up in Paris. It's what happened to Marsden Hartley who found Blue Rocks, Nova Scotia in 1935, and shacked up with the Mason family of fishermen, furnishing an account of island life, and the sudden drowning of Alty and Donny Mason. And it's where in 1919, the Group of Seven preternaturally formed after Tom Thompson's death, and pioneered in oil, what was once a sacred Canadian north. We mustn't forget Paul Gauguin, a stock broker turned painter. He left his Parisian home, and wife behind, for his alter ego Tahiti, and a tropical paradise of exotic women, and an attempted escape from European identity. For the painter, the urge to travel for subject matter and study, is a method of practice well established in art history, but the reasons vary as much as the outcomes.

Just as the American painter John Marin went to Cape Split, Maine, each summer for most of his professional life, Steven Rhude has found himself in a similar pattern of exploration with Newfoundland and its Avalon Peninsula. Since joining the Emma Butler Gallery in 2012, Rhude has made numerous trips from his home in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, to Argenteia, Newfoundland by ferry, and then on by car to explore the Avalon with all its unique characteristics. Rhude calls these trips *reconnaissance missions*. They are essential for him in order to continue making paintings that are at once beautiful and intellectually challenging. But on another level, it's not just a quest for his own narrative. This, he has admitted, is self-evident. But indirectly, Rhude's paintings have become a conduit for those that may compare and contrast his experience of the Avalon with their own. A narrative that could also be considered part of our own journey as we contend with the notion of *place* becoming increasingly seductive through virtual reality, as opposed to a creative experience with it.

Rhude's professional career can be said to date from 1982, when he had the opportunity to travel from his home in Scarborough, Ontario, to Florence, Italy for a year of painting and study. It was a journey considered essential for any Canadian artist with aspirations of working with the human figure, and cultivating a realistic style, which was nonetheless out of sync with contemporary trends at the time. Aware of the iconoclasm that was bent on undermining traditional European conventions inherent in Canadian art, he instead opted for the vast storage of knowledge the past had to offer, and hopefully liberated some of it for his own use. There is no doubt that much of his conceptual technique became part of his visual compass during this year abroad, which also included time in Amsterdam and Paris museums studying old master works. Back in Canada, and following the direction set by work completed in Italy, the landscape and place motif has remained with Rhude to this day.

Aside from his family, Rhude artistically left much of Scarborough behind for good. After experiencing a real excitement for European art, he had time to consider a more historical association to something that has haunted him his whole artistic life; the purpose of narrative. The representational component in painting implies narrative, and yet, for Rhude it seems to have been a conceptual catalyst : "I was still young and naive, but the idea of narrative in painting intrigued me. Obviously, the land and cityscape of Scarborough have memories for me, it's where I grew up, but it held no real story for me to base a career on, so I thought like many others before me did - I'll go find one."

After a year working and painting in Georgian Bay, Ontario, Rhude moved in 1990 to Fox Island in Guysborough County, Nova Scotia. Still working in the plein air format he used in Italy, watercolour became his preferred medium for the first few years. He was extraordinarily prolific, completing about two hundred works per year. Rhude still believes most of these paintings to be extant works, but for many, he now has no record of ownership or location. Since they were often sold out of his cottage studio to collectors, his painting for this period remains somewhat vague and more difficult to chronicle. This pattern was broken when he found more reliable gallery representation in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and eventually Newfoundland.

Not long after his move to Fox Island, the moratorium on the cod fishery was announced. At this point in time Rhude turned to a more symbolic use of imagery in the form of the dory on a clothesline in picturesque locations, a seemingly playful image with dark undertones suggesting the politics of coastal communities *being hung out to dry*. This series continued sporadically until 2014, and his final painting on the subject - a singly red dory hanging on a line overlooking Burnt Point, on the Avalon peninsula.

The construction of a two story studio on his property in Fox Island helped Rhude consolidate his direction and venture into more ambitious paintings where scale and content were important. As plein air painting decreased his studio works increased, not only in scale, but narrative as well. More specifically, his name was starting to be associated with those that came before him in an unofficial Atlantic School of Realism composed of Mary and Christopher Pratt, Alex Colville, David Blackwood, and others.

With his painting maturing, and coastal issues fermenting by the day in his community, Rhude started to look at possible images that reflected this tension. His debut work of the

*Boat on a Road* paintings was completed in his Fox Island studio in 1996, and what may suggest a familiar location to Nova Scotia residents, was turned into a definition of community solidarity. A surreal and idiosyncratic image, that ironically found its way into a private collection in Maine, gave birth to a continuous series of road blockage paintings which co-opt local utilitarian objects for the concept of stasis, a period of local reflection and inactivity, which he wished to convey. Rhude's images were taking on a recognizable political tone which, he would admit later on in his career, he was uncomfortable with, but compelled to do nonetheless.

As Rhude developed an intimate relationship with his rural surroundings, the historical narratives began to appear too. After moving to Lunenburg, Nova Scotia with his family in 2002, he executed a series of five paintings of the Pictou Light in Nova Scotia burning to the ground. They were based on an actual event and later dovetailed into an exhibition of new work in Halifax of the Atlantic Canadian lighthouse, a coastal icon declared surplus under the Harper government's policy. With rural out migration speeding up, Rhude felt this policy was more than economic, but also symbolic of coastal communities being targeted for closure.

It's fair to say that Rhude's art was deliberately courting narrative at this point in time. By inviting the picturesque into social conditions, he was distancing himself from any minimalism and conceptualism that eschewed narrative, expression, symbolism, biography, subject, and social issues, for what was believed to be a more purified form of beauty. Rhude's path was being nurtured by his passion for the vernacular and regional ethos that was now as much a part of him, as he was of it.

By 2012 Rhude's paintings were selling consistently and garnering attention through a regular schedule of commercial exhibitions. Despite this strong association of Rhude with his home province of Nova Scotia, his interest was not limited to it. Things changed for him when Emma Butler called and agreed to represent him in her St. John's gallery with one suggestion; to use his conceptual process in Newfoundland as he has done in Nova Scotia. Butler's support of Rhude's art, in both philosophical and regional respects, has been crucial for his development and productivity to date. This association continues today with Alison Butler, gallery director, with whom Rhude relies upon for convincing people of the direction and value of his work, and her insight into the culture of Newfoundland.

This transition marked a significant change for Rhude: "For the first time in a while I felt like a traveller and a painter. Arriving in Argentia by boat was remarkable, we drove on to Ochre Pit Cove and I just let the coast roll over and through me, and I knew I had found a second motif to be closely associated with." What has become evident in his Avalon painting output is that with each trip, he preferred to intensify the impact of the coastal experience by repeating the process of entering and leaving. In using the Avalon as a source of inspiration he would then retreat to his studio back in Wolfville for the familiarity of a world necessary for prolonged concentration, with his family, and a winter base. This routine earmarks again his earlier change from working specifically from the fact, and turning to an ideology of creating a painting, however distant from what may have originally inspired it, in order to consider and investigate new pictorial problems.

Rhude takes an approach to his subject matter, as though it were the scene of a crime. His reconnaissance methodology is based on a number of factors. Road journals are important in a chronological sense. For example, the Avalon has a large number of coves and communities up and down the eastern shore. Rhude would photograph community road signs upon entering to keep his bearings accurate, and date the entry of each community and time in his notebook. This allowed him to bracket any number of notes or source photographs he may take of a given community, and avoid any unnecessary confusion. Source material included roads, objects, architecture, people, landscape and seascape. Rhude also conducts what he refers to as *yarning interviews*, the kind one would expect from a tourist. Innocuous questions about place, community history, fishing, gossip, and politics.

Sometimes these conversations seem to give him the seeds of a concept, and a connection to a place (Rhude learned this technique while studying at the Ontario College of Art and Design through class assignments in Chinatown). An example of this is found in the background research of Rhude's 2012 painting *Passing Through Dildo*. A conversation Rhude had with a local about the community of Dildo came around to the origin of the name, and he was told it was always 'just so.' Rhude suspected there was more to it than that. In fact, there was a nomenclature board formed on Toponymic research around the turn of the twentieth century at Memorial University, in order to put an end to postal chaos regarding duplication, or unfortunate toponyms. In 1916, many communities resisted place name 'sanitization', Dildo being one. Rhude went back to the place of his conversation with fresh eyes and composed a sketch configuration of two sheds and a road, with the idea of place resistance in his mind, and then executed the painting back in his studio.

Rhude's mid-career Avalon paintings move relentlessly toward a narrative without divulging all the facts. He continued to mix places, objects, and people, with the intent to reassemble a situation that leaves us with a vague feeling of unease and sometimes tension. One gets the disjointed comprehension that this concept is like dice shaken around in a cup, where the artist hopes for some kind of magic number to appear, yet it never does. Although the settings are in general still picturesque, we sense the subject is indeed fictional and paradoxical, where objects and places have been pictorially recomposed from their actuality. Rhude's application of this idea of *recomposition*, as he calls it, has led him to acerbically refer to himself as a liar, a reference to Picasso's famous quote. From Rhude's artist statement for the Emma Butler Gallery in 2014: ***"It's been said that painting is a lie... that there is no defining moment that captures an essential truth about a situation or place. However I do love to make paintings, so one could conclude I also love to lie. Consequently, what I've come to accept is this: Painting has made me an assembler of place - that inexplicable region of our experience that reaches out and touches us without necessarily saying how or why. So I work with what I find - like chance encounters with buildings, roads and objects. Then I strip them of their situation and assemble a new one, with the hope this will provide me with some clue or narrative for understanding."***

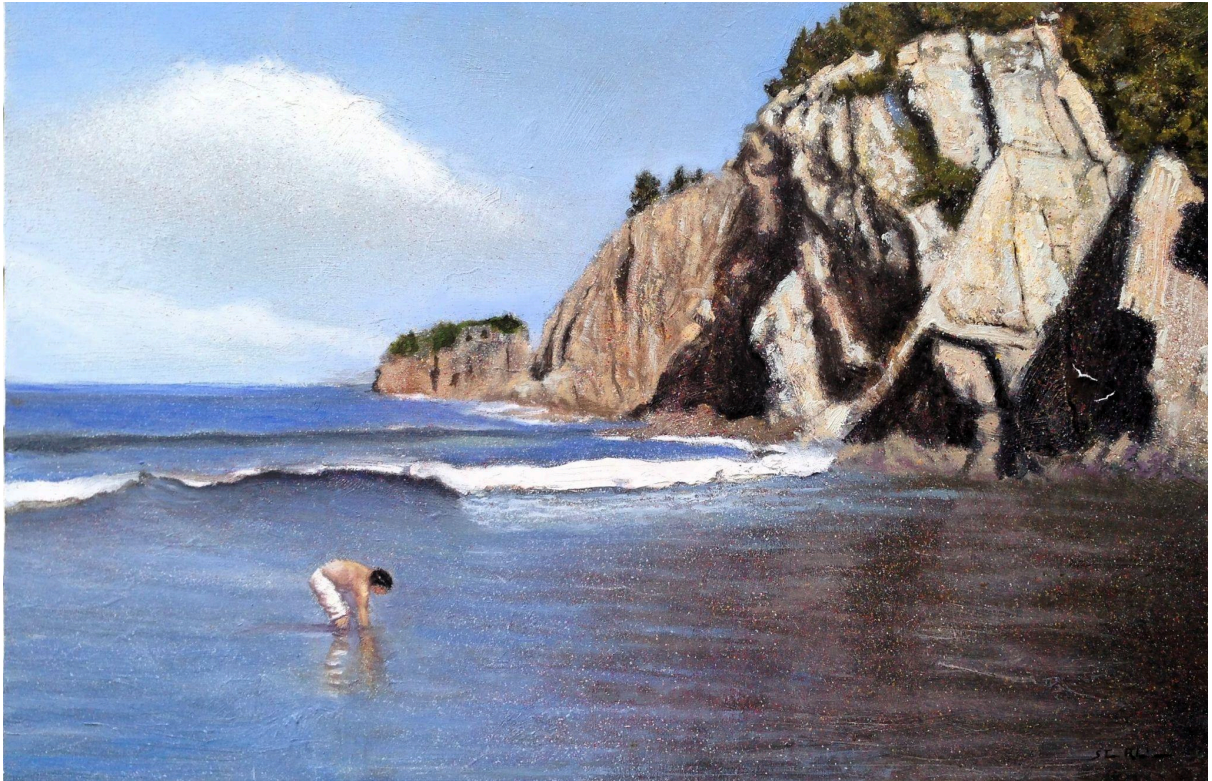
If an artist's output is circular and not linear in the traditional sense, then Rhude's cycle of *Avalon* paintings complete the circle of recomposition he adheres to. The road motif has led him from the trans Canada highway towards Clarenville, to Ochre Pit, Flambro Head, Sibley's, Old Perlican, Bay de Verde, and Grates Cove, and back, where strangely enough, the

enigma of these solitary communities continue to posit the concept of stasis, and leave us considering the texture of his ideas through a culture of inquiry. And that may indeed be what Steven Rhude is seeking, not just the literal Avalon, where a story in paint may or may not provide answers, but envisioning a narrative that sparks the mind, as we all seek Avalon.

*Simone Labuschagne, 2024*

Colour Plates





Age of Innocence, oil on panel, 13" x 20"





Battery Sheds, oil on canvas, 24" x 24"





Battery Wharf, oil on canvas, 24" x 24"







**4 Man in a Boat, oil on panel, 26" x 18"**



**Woman and Black Lab, oil on panel, 11" x 14"**







**6 Boy with Tree Limb, Brigus Rock**



**Brigus Rock (The Stoic), oil on canvas, 36" x 48"**





**Buoys and Paint, oil on canvas, 25" x 28"**



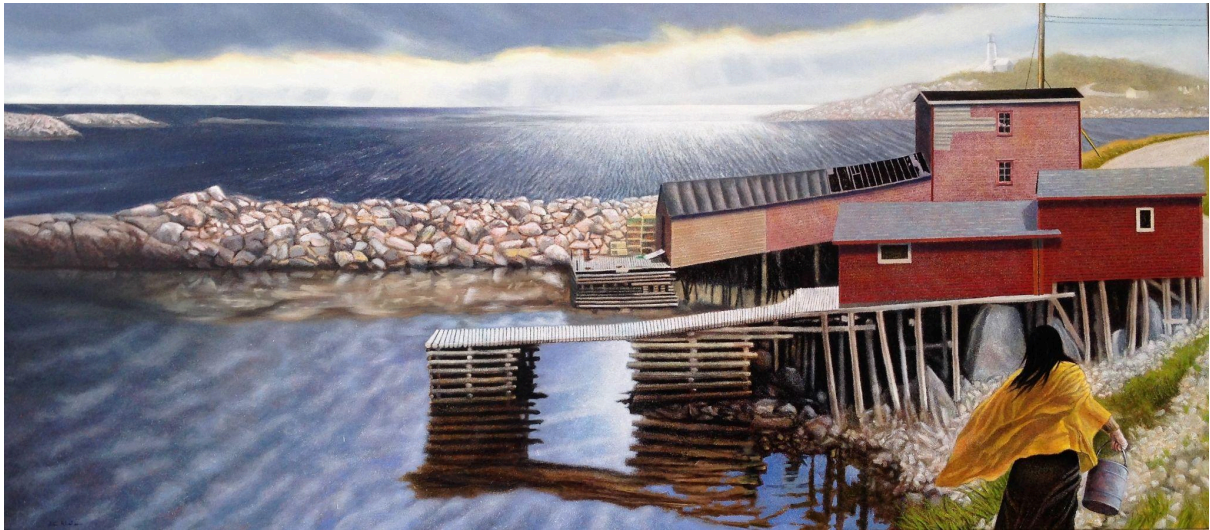


**Cape Spear (Still Life), oil on canvas, 24" x 36"**





**Caplin Days, oil on canvas, 38" x 46"**



**Custard Head Road, oil on canvas, 40" x 90"**





**Dory at Mad Rocks, oil on canvas, 38" x 41"**



**From Red Head Cove, oil on canvas, 40" x 80"**





**Hearts Desire (Boxes), oil on canvas, 23" x 60"**





**Henry Drummond's Vision, oil on panel, 20" x 20"**





**Heart's Content (Iris and Buoy) ,oil on canvas, 21" x 21"**





**Out Port Girls, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"**



**Study of a Fish Plant Worker, oil on canvas, 20" x 23"**





**The Fortunate Isles (Two Boats Salmon Cove), oil on canvas, 38.5" x 58"**



**The Innocents (Cape Spear Barrens), oil on canvas, 36" x 48"**





**Two Flags, Broad Cove, oil on panel, 11" x 14"**





**Moon over the Droke (Job's Cove), oil on panel, 24" x 34"**



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**Verso; The Innocents (Cape Spear Barrens), oil on canvas, 36" x 48"**

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