

# GORDON SMITH: A LIFE IN BRUSH STROKES

ON THE OCCASION OF HIS 90<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY, THE WEST COAST MODERNIST PAINTER TALKS ABOUT HIS CONTINUING WORK, HIS INFLUENCES, AND THE INSPIRATION HE DRAWS FROM THE HOME HIS FRIEND ARTHUR ERICKSON DESIGNED FOR HIM.

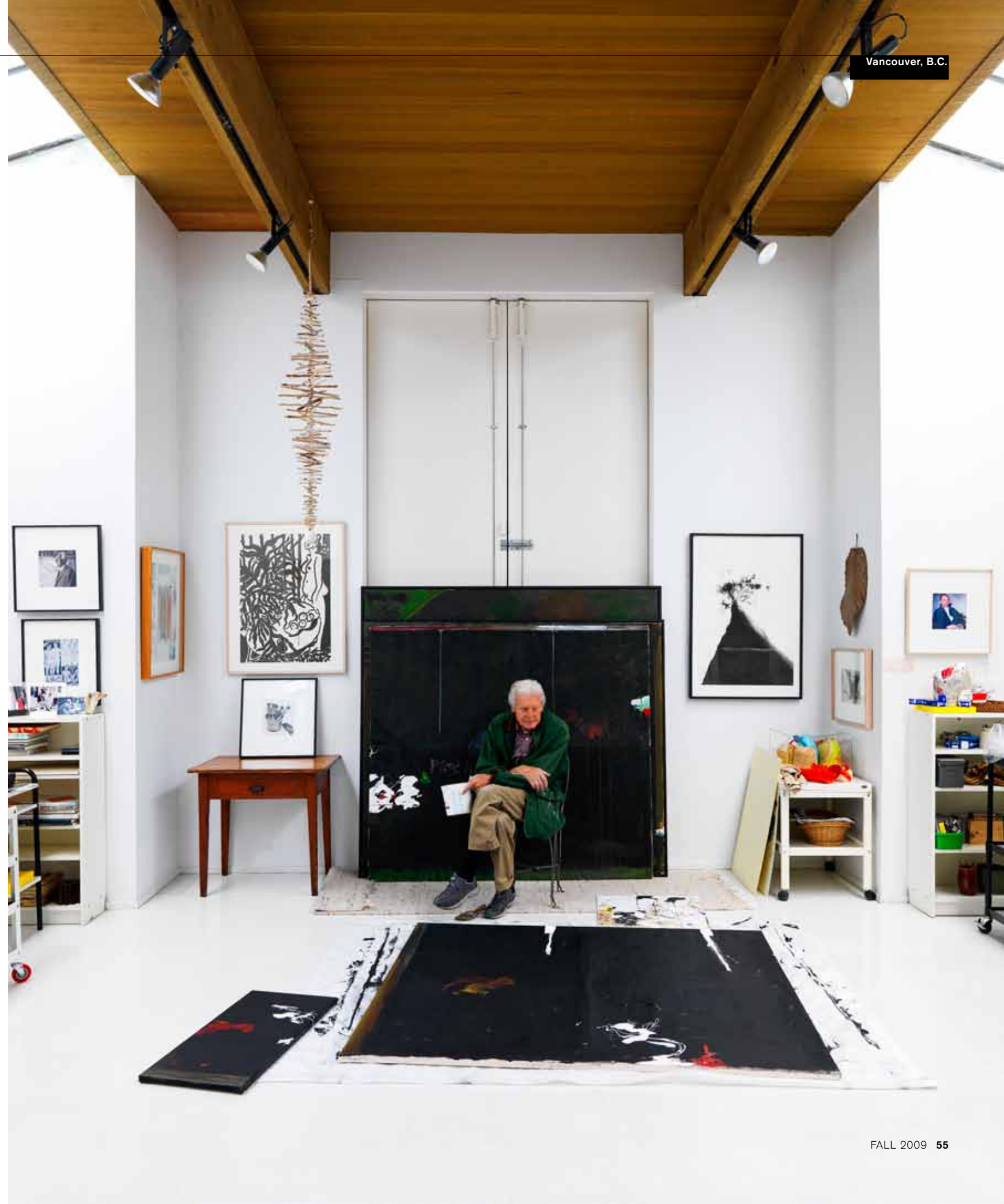
BY JENNIFER VAN EVRA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTIN TESSLER

The midday sun streams through a string of skylights at the top of Gordon Smith's studio as he leafs through the gifts he recently received for his 90th birthday. But there are none of the requisite paperweights or pens, socks or sweaters here. The prominent Canadian painter is holding a stack of works that his artist friends have sent, including a drawing from wildlife artist Robert Bateman and, from Rodney Graham—known for his layered conceptual art—a self-portrait photo in which he's playing "Happy Birthday" to Smith on an old squeezebox.

"Isn't that incredible?" says Smith, as he lingers a little longer on Graham's present. "It was something else to get that."

Around him hang works by a multi-generational who's who of West Coast visual art that includes Jack Shadbolt, Jeff Wall, and Stan Douglas, as well as paintings that he created—large-scale tangles of colour and form that were inspired by the scenery surrounding his West Vancouver home and have won him dozens of honours, including the Order of British Columbia, the Order of Canada, and this year a Governor General's Award in visual and media arts.







**'IT'S A HOUSE FOR A GREAT CANADIAN ARTIST BY A GREAT CANADIAN ARCHITECT ON A PHENOMENAL SITE. IT'S ALL THE RIGHT THINGS COMING TOGETHER.'**

**—BING THOM, ARCHITECT**



But Smith is not only surrounded by art; he literally lives in it. One of five buildings to receive the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada's Prix du XXe siècle, in 2007, for "enduring excellence of nationally significant architecture," his home was among the first designed by Arthur Erickson, who remained one of his closest friends until the legendary architect's death earlier this year.

Of course, Smith and Erickson weren't nearly as well known when they first met in the early 1940s at the home of Group of Seven painter Lawren Harris, who invited friends in on Sunday evenings to listen to music and talk about art. Smith—an aspiring painter then, whose first job was drawing for Eaton's catalogues—had just returned from the war with a massive leg injury that haunts his gait to this day. Erickson, who had also served in the war, was fast gaining renown for his paintings, which landed him an exhibit at the Manitoba Society of Artists when he was just 19 years old.

Before long, Erickson turned to architecture, and by 1953 he, along with partner Geoffrey Massey, was designing the Smiths' first home, also in West Vancouver. "He wanted a box built on stilts and it was a good idea," says Smith, who built that house for under \$11,000 with the help of a group of art students. "But it was a total disaster. It practically fell down."

Smith vowed never to hire Erickson and Massey to build him another home—"I said we'll never even have Geoff and Arthur near a design," he jokes—but a decade later his wife, Marion, found an idyllic acre lot near the ocean in West Vancouver for \$9,000 and they once again called on their close friend, who by then had won international acclaim for his strikingly modern design of Simon Fraser University. (Erickson went on to design landmarks around the world, including Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto, the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, and the Canadian embassy in Washington, D.C.)

There were no preconditions for the design of the house, which cost just \$25,000 to build, and the only choice Smith made in the process was the colour of the floor tiles on his studio—white or putty grey. "I chose the putty grey, but when I came out to see it, the floor was all white," recalls Smith. "I said, 'Arthur, what's this?' He said, 'White's better.' And he was right."

Tailor-made for the Smiths' love of art and the outdoors, the home that Erickson crafted is widely considered one of the finest works of his career and a modernist masterpiece even though it's barely over 1,500 square feet in size. Perfectly

*Visitors to the Smith residence—a square spiral built upward by overlapping beams around a courtyard—can proceed in a clockwise direction, up to the kitchen, living room, and bedroom, and then emerge outside on the deck over the carport (this page, top).*

*Previous page: Gordon Smith in his studio, surrounded by works by a who's who of West Coast art, as well as his own paintings, many inspired by the forest setting of his home in West Vancouver.*





integrated with its surroundings, the house gradually rises along a rocky slope, starting with the studio, which boasts 17-foot-high ceilings and myriad skylights that flood the room with natural light. A few steps up take you through the galley kitchen and eating area, which feature fir beams and floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto a large patio and garden, as well as tall cedars and firs and, interspersed between boughs, views of the ocean.

But it's the living room that makes jaws drop. Raised above the rock, and bridging the studio and dining area with the bedroom, it features floor-to-ceiling glass walls that make it seem like you're sitting right in the forest.

"The house touches the landscape so lightly and blends so well with the site that it's virtually not there. It's [as if] the house is a layer of clothing, but so light, like silk or chiffon," notes Vancouver-based architect Bing Thom. "It's a house for a great Canadian artist by a great Canadian architect on a phenomenal site. It's all the right things coming together."

It's also a place where many people came together—and still do. Erickson had a penchant for glamorous friends, says Smith, and often celebrity guests came to wine and dine, such as Pierre and Margaret Trudeau, who ate salmon that Smith barbecued over a firepit in the backyard. The Smiths also regularly entertained artists, up-and-coming as well as established, including their close friends, the Shadbolts and the Binnings. The home remains a hive of activity, so much so that Thom limits the amount of time he spends there because he wants to make sure Smith has time to paint.

"Ironically, it's not a house where you can hang a lot of paintings except in the studio," adds Thom with a laugh. "But then the painting is the landscape. And I'm sure every day, Gordon draws inspiration from living in the house because he's living in the landscape."

That irony is not lost on Smith—he does wish he had more wall space to hang artwork—but Thom is right. Over the past 45 years, the house and its surrounds have become so tightly woven into the painter's work that the two are impossible to separate.

Growing up in England, Smith inherited his passion for art from his father, who sold paintings door to door and gave his two sons pots of watercolours and brushes for Christmas. But it was a 1,500-kilometre Greyhound trip in 1939 to the San Francisco World's Fair, where he saw cutting-edge

*The house crafted by the late architect Arthur Erickson for his friend Gordon Smith—a modernist masterpiece barely over 1,500 square feet—integrates perfectly with its surroundings. The living room—which bridges the studio and dining area with the bedroom—features floor-to-ceiling glass walls that create the feeling that you're sitting right in the forest. The fireplace is made of bush-hammered concrete, as are the foundation walls of the home.*





A certain architectural strength and simplicity were achieved using a minimal number of materials and elements. Other than glass and concrete, basically only one finish is present—the one applied to the wood, which resulted in a colour more of a patina than a stain. The finish was used on the siding, ceiling, oak floors, cabinetry, even the burlap covering the walls. Beams and posts are of the same size; flooring, roofing, and siding are of the same material.



## 'PEOPLE SAY, "WHY DON'T YOU CUT DOWN THESE TREES? YOU'D HAVE A VIEW," ' SMITH SAYS. 'BUT THAT IS MY VIEW—IT'S A VIEW OF THE GARDEN AND THE TREES!'

works such as Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, that Smith realized "there was more to painting than pretty little watercolours."

"I love the forest. I love the landscape. But I want to find something where the painting becomes more than the subject matter," he explains, pointing to artists Emily Carr, Frans Hals, and J.M.W. Turner to illustrate his point. "The paint and the colour and the brushwork become the image, not the boat or whatever it is you're painting. That's what I try to do."

According to Daina Augaitis, the Vancouver Art Gallery's chief curator and associate director, Smith and his contemporaries were instrumental in leaving British and European influences behind and forging a new path—one that is native to the West Coast. "There was a very different form of modern art that came out of Vancouver. It was much more lyrical and

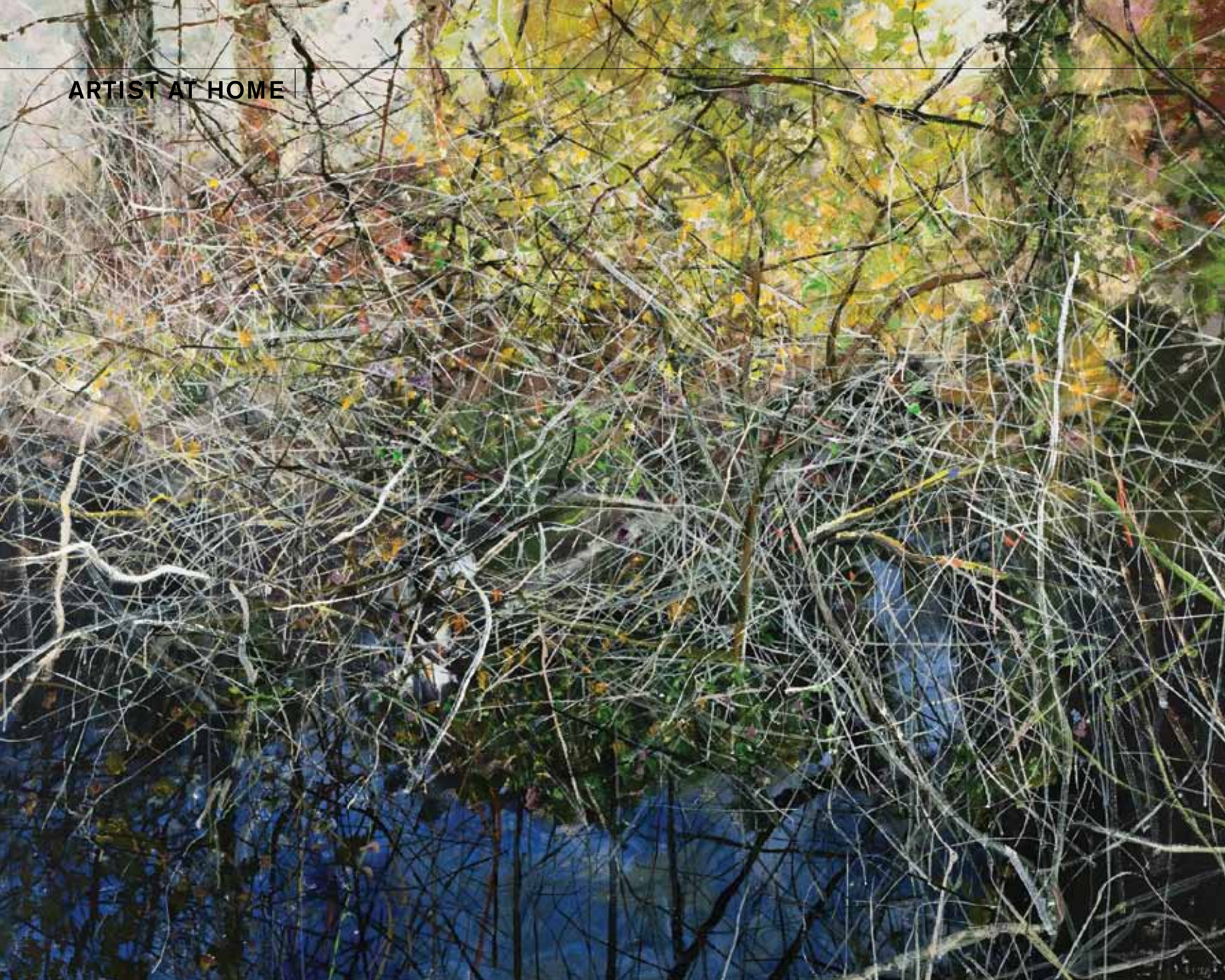
poetic and always connected to the landscape, and I think Gordon was a very important proponent of that movement," says Augaitis. "Vancouver was a kind of frontier town at the time, and those ideas were really radical. In many ways, they paved the way for modern thinking in this place."

Smith, however, is too modest to take credit for the trails he blazed; he would much rather compliment the generations of artists that have followed him—the Vancouver school of photo-conceptualists that includes Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall, "Young Romantics" such as Angela Grossmann, and contemporary artists Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen.

"I have learned so much in the last 10 years from the young artists—like [Attila] Richard Lukacs. He is a great, great artist," says Smith, who taught art education at the University of British Columbia for more than 25 years. "He paints







**Above:** Creekside Grasses #1, 2009  
Acrylic on canvas, 67 x 85 inches  
Equinox Gallery

**Left:** Byway Trees, AVI, 2000-01  
Acrylic on canvas  
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery  
Artist's gift

**Opposite:** Wet Night, 1953  
Oil on canvas  
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery  
T. Eaton Co. Picture Purchase Fund  
Photo: Trevor Mills/  
Vancouver Art Gallery



### GORDON SMITH: A CHRONOLOGY

- 1919** Gordon Smith is born in Hove, Sussex, England.
- 1933** Smith's mother leaves his father and brings her two sons to Winnipeg.
- 1942** Smith joins the Royal Canadian Infantry and is posted to England, Scotland, and Sicily. He returns home from the war in 1944 with a major leg injury.
- 1945** Graduates from the Vancouver School of Art. Begins teaching there alongside B.C. Binning, Jack Shadbolt, and others.
- 1953** Arthur Erickson designs his first house ("a total disaster"), for Gordon and Marion Smith.
- 1956** Joins the faculty of education at the University of British Columbia, where he teaches until 1982.
- 1960** Represents Canada at the São Paulo Art Biennale.
- 1964** Erickson designs second Smith house, in West Vancouver.
- 1966** A *Time* magazine writer asks Smith about his constant dissatisfaction with his own work, despite the fact that he was a renowned artist and professor. He says, "I'd like to paint just one good painting."
- 1970** With Erickson, creates an installation for the Canada Pavilion at Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan.
- 1976** Commissioned to contribute to "Homage au Prix Nobel," a suite of graphics commissioned by the Nobel Prize committee for presentation to the Nobel laureates.
- 1981** Named professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia.
- 1988** Commissioned to create a mural for the Canadian embassy in Washington, D.C., designed by Erickson.
- 1989** With Jack Shadbolt and Bill Reid, founds the Artists for Kids Gallery in North Vancouver.
- 1996** Appointed to the Order of Canada.
- 2000** Appointed to the Order of British Columbia.
- 2009** Presented with a Governor General's Award in Ottawa.  
Gordon Smith turns 90.

**ON THE NEW GENERATION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA ARTISTS: 'I LOVE WHAT'S BEING DONE TODAY. I DON'T UNDERSTAND IT ALL, BUT I LOVE IT. THESE YOUNG GUYS, THEY'VE BROKEN BARRIERS DOWN AND GOTTEN AWAY FROM THE ROYAL ACADEMY AND THAT KIND OF THING.'**





12 hours a day with little brushes and enormous canvasses. I feel like I'm a member of the West Van Sketch Club with my funny bits of painting."

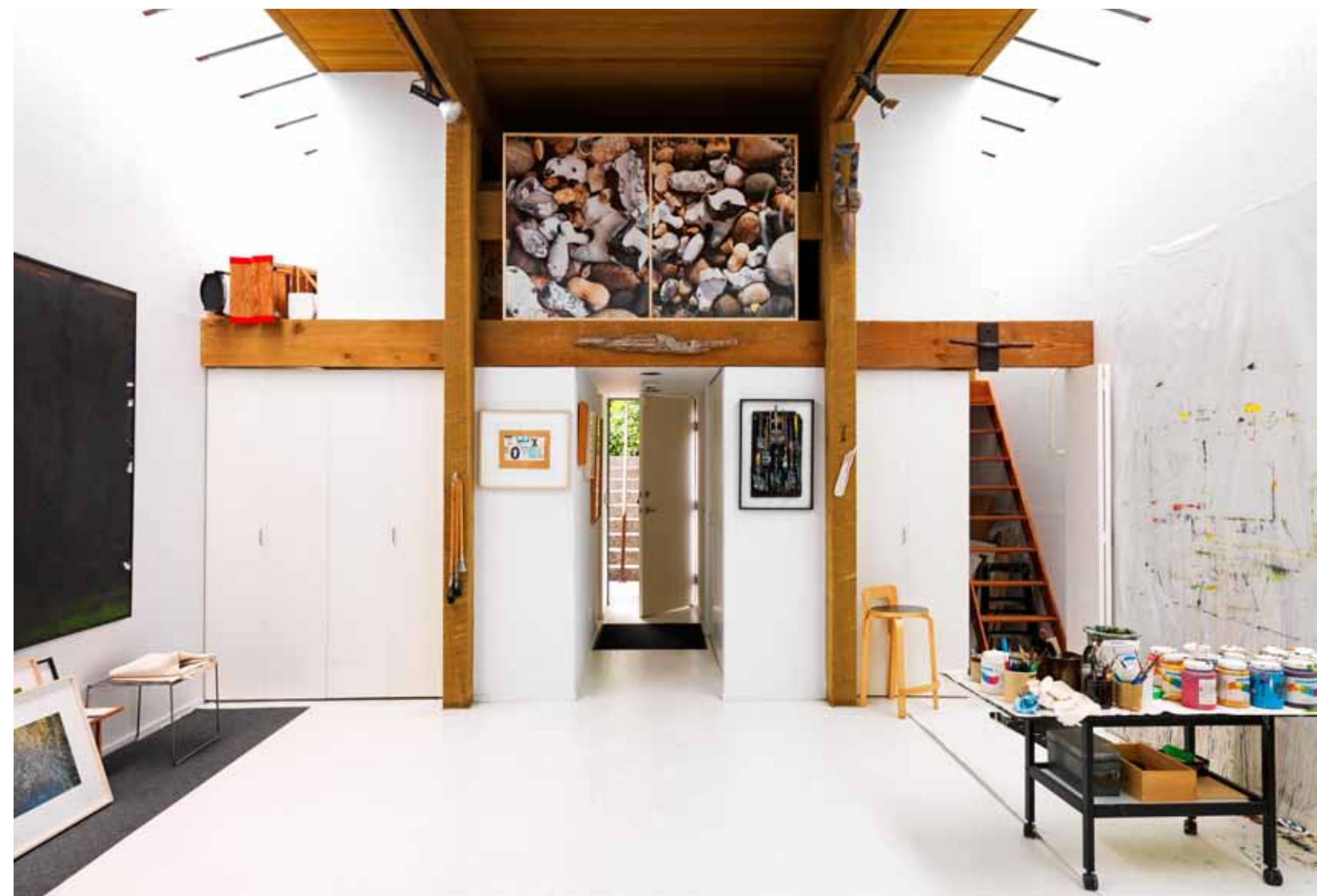
Of course, artists don't win Governor General's Awards for funny bits of painting, nor do their works hang in the Canadian embassy in Washington, D.C., Vancouver International Airport, The Chan Centre for the Performing Arts, and countless other major institutions. "At 90 he continues to reinvent himself and make extraordinarily powerful paintings," says Augaitis. "They just seem to get better and better."

Morning has turned to afternoon, and after a bowl of soup with Marion and the couple's two nurses, it is time for Smith to return to his studio, where he is creating a piece based on some brambles he photographed nearby. On the wall is a treasure trove of artworks and memorabilia—Lawren Harris's

paintbrushes, one of the illustrations (a man in long johns) that Smith drew for an Eaton's catalogue, and a small printed card from the days when the house was first being built that reads: "Marion Is Never To Take Any Advice From Gordon. She Is Completely Responsible For The House."

A long-time philanthropist, Smith says that when he and his wife of 68 years pass away, the house and property will be donated to the Vancouver Art Gallery for them to use as they wish or to sell. He loves the house that Erickson designed for him, but he values art above all else.

"You don't just work three or four hours in the studio. It's a total lifestyle. You think about art. You talk with your friends about art. You dream about art, then you wake up and it's there. And you read and you learn and you look and you travel," says Smith. "You just can't shut your eyes." ●



**ON BORROWING FROM OTHER ARTISTS: 'I ALWAYS SAY I AM A HUNDRED PAINTERS DEEP. PICASSO SAID, "A GOOD ARTIST BORROWS AND A GREAT ARTIST STEALS." AND JOHN UPDIKE SAID IN *THE NEW YORKER* THAT HE DOESN'T READ TO LEARN; HE READS TO STEAL. AND IT'S TRUE.'**

