A search for beauty

By Andrea Raymond

I met John McMillan a few months ago here at the Scarborough Arts Council. He was bringing in some cards to sell in The Bluffs Gallery. I was quite taken with the image gracing his card, and visited his website to see more of his work.

McMillan, a lawyer by day and an artist in all of the time in between, took up photography 10 years ago. With no formal training in photography, McMillan picked up most of the technical aspects of the art form from his brother Jim, a talented sports photographer. The rest has been experimentation and trial and error on his part, the results of which, are quite beautiful.

A traveler at heart, he takes a number of trips each year, finding himself in places like Scotland and Alaska, and closer to home in Ontario. McMillan finds beauty in the most mundane of objects, and often captures what he sees in the form of a visually arresting photograph. His motivation to take photos stems from a desire to share what he sees (and feels) first with friends and family and ultimately with those who view his images in a gallery. He strives to evoke emotion, and does so successfully.

McMillan is quick to credit his wife for her support of his artistic endeavours. “A few years back when we were traveling through Scotland my wife said ‘All you have to do is decide that this is what you want to do and you can.’ My wife has faith in me.” Bolstered by this support and the acceptance of his work by several galleries, McMillan jokes that his career as a lawyer is paying for his film.

“I’ve taken some of the most ordinary objects you can imagine, and other objects that are conveying beauty and majesty. My inner eye is always looking for beauty in an old barn or a swamp, or even something as simple as a single tree branch.” McMillan is very patient when he sees the beauty in an object. He describes a late summer trip to Alaska. “I was looking out a wrecked pier at 4 a.m. It was heavily shrouded with mist on the water. I waited... for just enough mist to lift. I had a three-minute window of opportunity to get the shot, after which a rather ordinary scene emerged - most things have a moment of beauty - you just have to wait for it.”

The photographic works of John McMillan are a product of patience. Most objects and places, including the ordinary, have their "moments". McMillan strives to draw out the essence of solitude, tranquility, power, beauty, stillness and other stirring sensations. He captures the forces and elements that influence the subject, such as light, reflection and shadows. It is also through grain, texture and contrast, not colour, that the images of John McMillan strike the eye.

He shoots old barns, castles, landscapes, seascapes, and has also done some documentary style photography featuring Toronto’s former Tent City, with which he and several “street photographers” held an exhibit and fundraiser for Meal Exchange. There’s always a camera close by, ready to shoot the beauty that McMillan so clearly has an eye for.

McMillan enjoys being a lawyer thoroughly, and is not aiming to substitute a career as an artist for the engaging career he has now. Rather, he considers himself a lawyer and a photographer. He says, “Photography gives me pleasure - it’s a way of communicating love and affection. I always have someone in mind when I see a shot. If you successfully achieve the simplest of meaning, tranquility - solitude - that’s time well spent.”

To see the beauty that McMillan so often finds on his travels, visit http://www3.sympatico.ca/mcmillanjohn and be sure to come on down to a solo exhibition of his work at The Bluffs Gallery February 3 - 17, 2004 (reception, Feb. 7 from 1 - 4 p.m.) titled Love & Beauty. The gallery is located at 1859 Kingston Rd. For info on the show, call 416-698-7322. If you’d like to contact John McMillan, call 416-823-2525.