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## Interview with Jeff Dillon, Featured Artist 51.3



Elena Bentley – Hello, Jeff!

Jeff Dillon – Hello!

EB – Thank you so much for meeting with me today. I really appreciate it. Let's jump right in. I'm by no means an artist, so I'm hoping you can tell us a little bit about your style. I mean, I love the colour. I love the linework. I've noticed a little bit of van Gogh, and then I thought a little bit of Edvard Munch and "The Scream." Tell us, if you can, a little bit about your artistic and non-artistic influences.

JD – My most significant artistic influence would be Vincent van Gogh. I mean, he's inspiring in so many different ways. A big part of it is his story. I've read a few books about him and his letters, and found him an interesting character to follow. I do like the way he uses colour. There are bright yellows and blues for the sky and all this intensity. His strokes are a bit shorter because he painted very fast and in oil, so it goes on thick and fast, and my stuff is quite the opposite. It's a much more layered and slower process. The other influence I have is the Group of Seven. I like Lawren Harris's work. There are a few of them in there that I really admire for, again, their use of intensity, and Lawren Harris precisely because of how he shapes things.

Otherwise, the other influence is nature itself. It's so appealing at different times of day and seasons, whether you're up close or far away. I'm not a painter who paints one subject. Some people will hone in and paint just trees or certain wildlife. I paint different subjects, and I like the challenges of how colour and light represent the natural world.

EB – Interesting! It's really interesting to hear you talk about that. And you've brought up that those artists use oil, so let's jump into your medium. I notice for these pieces for *Grain* that they are acrylic. Is that your medium of choice? Do you work in other mediums?

JD – I use Golden Acrylics. Golden is an apt company name for paints. I find their quality really, really good. They have a few different types, and I prefer their Heavy Body Acrylics and Fluid Acrylics. I like acrylics because they mix really nicely, and from that point, you can thicken them up or thin them out. They also dry quickly.

EB – Do you ever dabble in any other mediums?

JD – Nope. That's my go-to. It's challenging enough. I have a rack here with every single colour.

EB – Oh, wow! I love that.

JD – It's a tower. It goes right to the roof and all the way down. It's pretty much what the store has, so I can keep track of the inventory. The tubes are easier to use. And what's great about having every colour that they have is I don't waste a lot of time blending. I still blend, but if you're trying to get a particular colour, you could combine many colours to get a close one, but you won't get the intensity. It will tend to fade a bit, so I like the intensity of it coming straight out of the tube if I want that colour. You also don't waste a lot of paint trying to blend, and then trying to keep and maintain it.

EB – I love that you have the whole rack. You don't have to go to the store, you don't have to go shopping. It's just right there.

JD – It was my dream to have that flexibility. Before, I used to buy the wrong paint. I'd go to the store and think, Oh, shoot! Do I have this paint? Yeah, I probably don't have it. Then I'd come back and realize I had seven of that colour. And they are expensive. They can range from around \$17 to \$40, depending on the colour. This will jump a bit, I know, into your question about what I've been doing lately with all the night scenes [featured in *Grain*].

EB – Let's talk about it, sure!

JD – I love nighttime. It's my favourite time of day. I love walking around at night. I like that it's quiet. Usually, I walk around, ten or eleven o'clock at night, and I live in a little subdivision where I could walk around in circles. Very rarely do I run into a neighbour. It's usually just me, and it's quiet, and you can hear the crickets, or in winter, just the wind. I like it when you can see the stars because in the day the sky is blue, so it just feels like, even if there are clouds, there's a roof on you. When it's clear at night, it feels like [the sky] just goes on forever.

And I love clouds, especially when they move around at night—that's why I was trying to figure out how to paint what I was seeing, but it was so stark and I didn't know how to represent it. Sometimes I have an idea for a painting, but I know it's not the year for it. I love the nighttime scenes. I wasn't ready to handle the shapes and the textures, and I didn't know how to handle the light years ago when I wanted to do it. I tried a few, but I didn't know how to do that. I'm comfortable, I thought I would try it. Then, I did a couple, and they got a lot of attention, and I thought, I'm just going to do this mini-series. I don't have to move my paints or reset them. I will use the same palette and keep working through it.

EB – I think a lot of what you said applies to writing, you know, or any medium—don't give up on it. Maybe you're not ready to do it now, but once you've gained more experience and practice, you can return to something you wanted to try.

JD – You really are your worst critic. Lots of people are interested in your work. They're aspiring because they're at different levels of their careers or have their own challenges for whatever they're working towards. Only some people's creative pursuit is a career, and it wasn't always mine. I can kind of start by explaining why I started painting.

EB – Yeah, tell us about that. I mean, many of us are often told, well, do that creative pursuit but have a day job or, you know, have that fall-back. So I think a lot of us get stuck. We want to make it our career, or be able to do that thing we love full-time. Was art always your aspiration, or did you go through different careers? This is your full-time gig now?

JD – I always found doodling to be something to pass the time. So, whether I was in school and should have been listening, I was usually doodling because I couldn't write the notes and listen at the same time. It wasn't easy, so I was often just listening and drawing.

I went through a rough period in life where I had a bunch of life crises that happened within five years. A critical moment was when my father got sick and ended up passing away. When all that happened, you know, I didn't really feel like going out, didn't really feel like talking. I didn't care what I was painting. I didn't even care how it looked. I wasn't going to show it; there wasn't anything about that. I had such a small amount of paint, and I just painted. It was just the emotion of taking it and putting it on canvas and being able to escape for a time.

I couldn't get into galleries in the early days, so I put a few pieces up in a hair salon. I put them [the paintings] in the law library at the courthouse— some people connected with my art there. At the Royal Bank, I had one of the pieces in the lobby until their head office kicked me out. So, everywhere I could, I put in my work. Even though I had a career, anytime anybody said, What do you do? I'd be like, I'm a painter. In my head, I tried putting myself there first, and I just kept pushing forward. So it became, what was therapy at first, just like a bit of a numbers game with me. I needed some goals, so I created them, which made the discipline, and then I stuck to it. I wasn't waiting for inspiration. I just showed up every day and painted. That's how it started, and then social media helped after that. I don't have a plan besides continuing to paint, and those goals help me stay on that track.

EB – That's fantastic. I think it's universally applicable, again, whether it's art or writing. I love that you're not just waiting for the muse or for that great idea to appear. You're just going to paint, be consistent, and keep practicing. I love the persistence, too.

JD – Exactly.

EB – So how do you find a good balance? Because I know if I'm working on something and I'm in the zone, I'll forget everything. I'll forget to eat, I'll forget to talk to anybody, and I could be up all night until nine in the morning still writing. What are your boundaries? Or maybe you don't have boundaries? Maybe tell us a bit about that.

JD – It really goes back to establishing a routine. The routine I had before with a job, and all that, was different. There was no time to think or do anything in the day, even into the early evening. My time was after eight o'clock. I would usually wrap up around twelve or one, which didn't make my sleep schedule great, but it is what it is. In truth, that time was just as important as sleep for me, mentally. I find that if I indulge and stay up until like three in the morning, the whole next day is crappy. I'm definitely not going to be painting the following evening, and that's one or two days out of step. Then you really feel behind and can't remember exactly what you were doing or how you were blending. By doing it every day, even though you're cutting it a bit short, the repetition of daily painting allows you to flow a bit easier. I think that goes with anything else in your life.

When I started full-time, I was like, okay, it's a job; I will do eight or nine hours daily. In reality, the human body isn't meant to sit in a perfectly straight pose for eight or nine hours daily, so I started painting four to six hours a day, seven days a week. It's much easier for me to not have a weekend and pretend every day is the same because I can physically do the hours if I spread them over seven days.

EB – I really appreciate that you're all about consistency. Why don't we talk a little bit about what you have coming up next?

JD – I don't have any shows, mostly because I don't have a lot of work. I'm lucky enough that I've been selling my work, and what I have is in the galleries. I think I'm at 274 paintings; only twenty aren't sold between my own small gallery and selling my paintings on my own. In the last number of years, some of my paintings have sold within minutes of posting the image online. That is always a thrill. I want to support them [the galleries], but selling on my own is also advantageous. It's a balance.

EB – So we can go on your website, or follow you on social media, to kind of keep up with what you're working on, which is nice because we can find you anywhere across the country.

JD – Yes. I am always happy to have more art enthusiasts as followers. I'm still learning about social media and Google, how to integrate them, and how to become a little bit more savvy.

I'm putting the effort into the right things, but it's hard to balance the business of a career in art and the creation itself. Many creative people are trying to take this on themselves and make it a business, so that they can survive off their work. You really have to be a content creator. Your work is your content. You have to package it and sell it, and you have to figure out your marketing strategy, how you're going to market, and how you'll present yourself.

It takes work. It's not like a paycheck. It's very commission based, so you sometimes have to get used to running in a deficit for a few months, and then it kicks back up again. It makes me anxious because you always worry, is it going to stop? It may not go back up. Maybe it's not a rollercoaster. I imagine this is common for artists in all genres.

EB – I feel like that. I'm sure a lot of artistic people feel that way; will it keep going up or will it plummet?

JD – And it will do both. But your sights have to be further than the short term. When I'm not selling as much, it's like, okay, it's a quiet time. Now is the time to paint, so when it does pick up, here's all my work. I use that time effectively rather than trying to go online and figure out what's happening right now. It's probably just cyclical, based on everyday people's habits. I've only been doing this for three years full-time, so I'm still learning and the world's changing. But that's the only way I look at it. Just keep trying to look ahead.

EB – That's great. This was a really great conversation! This is going to be a really interesting read, and I think writers and artists will get a lot out of it. Thank you so much.

[This interview has been edited for coherence, clarity, and length.]

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