PHOTO BY LAURA BILLINGHAM

NATURAL INSTINCTS

A childhood spent exploring Washington Crossing Historic Park informs the art of Annelies van Dommelen.

By PATTI ZIELINSKI

When you step into Annelies van Dommelen's home in Lambertville, you are greeted by Opal, her exuberant rescue puppy, who skitters at her heels. Take the stairs down into her studio—a sun-washed space in the back of the house that opens onto the D&R Canal towpath—and you enter another world. Works by the artist spanning over two decades are displayed salon-style, floor-to-ceiling. Paint, brushes, and frame-making tools are poised, ready for action, on rolling carts. One can spend hours here and still discover something new.

"Osmosis," van Dommelen says, turning around to take in the scope of her work—watercolor, acrylic, oils, and dioramas celebrating the beauty and wonder of nature. "I keep my eyes open when I'm out in nature. I look for visual treasures."

Elements from nature permeate her oeuvre, which spans close to a half-century. The daughter of Dutch immigrants, van Dommelen's love of the wild outdoors was fostered by her upbringing in Washington Crossing Historic Park, where her father served as superintendent for two decades, starting in 1957. As a girl she would spend long, blissful days wandering the woods and fields, observing the vegetation and animals, especially the winged variety like birds and moths, which today populate many of her paintings.

Corvins—especially crows or ravens—make frequent appearances in her art. "When I was 14, I saved an injured crow's life by taking it to the nature center to have its wing reset," she says. "After that, I was always drawn to corvins. I loved their sheer physicality. You won't see me painting chickadees. I like birds with formidable beaks."

ARTWORK PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANNELIES VAN DOMMELEN

Raven

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Inside her childhood home on the park's grounds, her mother—"an aesthete who set up tables like Dutch still lifes"—taught van Dommelen to embroider and honed her eye for detail. Although van Dommelen was classically trained by using models at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art, she prefers to paint spontaneously, with no reference material and no preconceived notion of how the painting will ultimately turn out. "Painting is like a puzzle," she says. "I love the intrigue of figuring it out. As I work, the concept reveals to me how it should look, but where the ideas come from remains a mystery."

As a printmaker, she sometimes starts the process by creating a monotype for the basis. When she begins to paint, she engages in "a back-and-forth conversation" with the work, which is in a constant state of editing: adding paint, removing paint, rounding, reconfiguring. Sometimes her paint sits 20 layers deep. "My challenge," she says, "is to sacrifice areas of great delight so as to lead the eye toward an important end."

Her home studio allows van Dommelen to easily step away and return with a fresh eye, the better to scrutinize what she might edit or add to next. Her interaction with her art directs the final painting, which she finishes by glazing—a potentially hazardous venture that involves applying a transparent or semi-transparent layer of paint, which modifies the

Childhood Story

appearance of the existing paint. "If you take glazing too far, you can lose the desired effect," she explains.

She prefers to create on hard, solid structures like Venetian plaster, clayboard, or bookbinding boards rather than canvas, and mines her color palette from decades of walking in the park, gravitating to the light King's Blue, creamy Naples Yellow and white.

In a departure from this spontaneous style, about a decade ago van Dommelen created a watercolor bestiary alphabet from which she sells giclées. "I used a lot of reference material for this series," she says. "I took out every library book I could find that had pictures of animals in various positions—children's books, illustrations, you name it."

At least once a year, she opens her studio to the public and revels in the conversations that ensue. "Since I work in so many mediums, this is more representative of who I am as an artist than to try to show one thing at a gallery," she says. She also shows her work at the Artists' Gallery in Lambertville, which she helped to found.

Still close enough to continue walking at her beloved Washington Crossing Park, van Dommelen feels happily ensconced in Lambertville, where she has lived for more than two decades. "This is a supportive community, filled with artists, writers and open-minded people," she says. "When you're surrounded by culture and nature, you inevitably gravitate toward it."

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