



DUANE NICKERSON

CLOSER

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

December 02, 2022 - January 14, 2023

**ABBOZZO**  
**GALLERY** TORONTO

A watercolor painting of a landscape. In the foreground, several tall, thin trees with sparse green and yellow foliage stand against a light, hazy background. The trees are rendered with soft, blended colors. In the distance, a blue horizon line suggests a body of water or a distant shore. The overall style is soft and atmospheric, with a focus on light and color washes.

## **ABBOZZO GALLERY**

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**Front cover image: *Smoke*, see page 21**

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## Foreword

“Trees for me are beacons of endurance and patience,” comments artist Duane Nickerson on a subject to which he’s devoted his best work in recent years.

Even a cursory look at his paintings will tell you something about patience. While a watercolour landscape is literally a wash of shades and pigments, the aging trees in Duane’s “portraits” are delineated with an exactitude that requires many hours with a very fine brush.

It’s tempting to classify these paintings as photorealism, or hyper-realism, where the objective is to portray human features and landscapes that are indistinguishable from photographs. We feel we could walk into one of the landscapes. But we could never walk into one of Duane’s landscapes, however real they appear.

Instead they come to us.

There’s a humanity in his trees—disfigured, isolated, crabbed and dismembered, but clinging to life. They are monuments to their own endurance. In some of the paintings, exposed roots appear as drips of paint detached from a ground producing a floating, ethereal effect, as if they were no longer earthbound but rising toward the sky, transformed and reborn.

In many of his paintings, amidst the dying there is new growth, even if nothing more than bright green moss issuing from the cracked, dry bark. The tension between life and death, growth and decay, fragility and permanence is ubiquitous—an inevitability balanced by promise. What Duane describes as “the will to live evident in the twisted, disfigured tree that has endured incredibly harsh conditions” reminds me of the old king, Lear, in Shakespeare’s famous tragedy. Cast out onto a wild heath to endure wind and weather, “unbonneted” and exposed, he urges the elements to “pour on, I will endure.”

That play too involves a rebirth, new growth, in wisdom and spirit before the old king eventually dies, leaving his youngest and dearest daughter to rule.

A far cry from a painting, we might say, unaware of the ambiguity here, for these trees themselves cry out from afar.

Silently, of course. They speak to us not in words but through attitudes of dignity, serenity, defiance and promise. Regally ensconced in a carpet of their own shed leaves, each leaf demarcated to the edge of its own minute shadow, they presage new growth even as they decompose. These do go gentle into that good night, rather than rage, rage against the dying of the light, to rephrase the poet, Dylan Thomas.

The energy in Duane's paintings is palpable but silent, reminiscent of those aging evergreens in Canada's wild boreal forests whose exposed roots unroll like firehoses down sheer rock faces to the nourishing soil below.

This energy is what Dylan Thomas called the "force that through the green fuse drives the flower/Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees/Is my destroyer." Duane describes the force in his paintings that supports both life and death, relating to his close studies of decaying leaves and tree stumps. "I see my studies as more accepting, open-ended observations of the mystery of life and death dancing in harmony."

Hardly photorealism then. More like metaphysical truth.

Colin Brezicki, October, 2022

## Artist's Statement

My current paintings display a closer exploration of the complex visual matrix that arises from the slow growth and decay of trees. With such subject matter, the theme of time is ever present. I am intrigued by the various tracks of time evident in the form of slow growing organisms that endure and decay through seasons of heat and cold. This sense of slow change is reflected in the process of layering mixtures of the primitive, physical medium of oil paint on a canvas surface and pastel marks on paper. The slowness of my technique pays modest tribute to the endurance of forests and the majesty of biological forces that continue to shape our environment.

My work is rooted in the tradition of landscape painting, a long and varied practice that extends to the dawn of human civilization and is featured prominently in the art making traditions of Canada. As a landscape painter, my intention is to explore a sense of being through careful study of natural forms shaped by time. Being, from my vantage point, involves sensing and accepting the force of eternity behind the veil of physical form; becoming more aware of the delicate dance of life and death that creates the beauty of the natural world we inhabit.

Duane Nickerson, 2022

**Arc, 2021**

Watercolour and pastel  
on rag paper laminated to canvas  
45 x 28 in.





**Breath, 2020**

Oil on Canvas

48 x 36 in

The thin soil of the Niagara escarpment creates an unstable environment for trees. Mighty maples standing for 60 years suddenly collapse on a stormy night. The subterranean network of roots is exposed, the breath of the tree is gone.



**Change, 2022**

Oil on Canvas  
24 x 18 in

The slow cycle of transformation observed near the trail edge. Perpetual change that is eternal, that is sacred, that manifests itself all around us.





**Coast, 2021**

Oil on Canvas  
66 x 52 in

An attempt to register memory of the density and complexity of the topography of Western Newfoundland. After days spent trekking through the thick entanglement of stunted spruce trees called "tuckamore", the sight and smell of the ocean brought a sense of openness and wellbeing.

**Coast (Study), 2020**

Watercolour and charcoal  
on rag paper

15 x 11 in





**Collapse, 2021**

Oil on Canvas

28 x 36 in

Early spring. A scene on the Niagara escarpment prompts reflection on the transience of experience, the impermanence of all things.



**Crown, 2022**

Watercolour and pastel  
on rag paper laminated to canvas  
36 x 20 in



**Curve, 2022**

Watercolour and pastel on rag paper

30 x 35 in



**Echo, 2020**

Watercolour and pastel  
on rag paper  
30 x 24 in



**Embrace, 2022**

Oil on Canvas

26 x 36 in

Two trees encountered deep in the forest. Interdependent for stability, balance and being. Another narrative for how life evolves.





**Flood, 2021**

Watercolour and pastel  
on rag paper laminated to canvas  
40 x 29 in



**Fog, 2022**

Oil on Canvas

26 x 36 in

Morning, late fall. The air itself speaks of the limits of understanding.



**Monument, 2020**

Oil on Canvas

40 x 52 in

A cedar stump. A monument to the flow of time. Old structures decay, new forms emerge.



**Moss, 2022**

Oil on Canvas

30 x 40 in

That place in the forest that separates above and below. Growth and decay, movement and stillness - a place that is and is not.

**Pine , 2020**

Oil on Canvas

42 x 20 in

A tall island pine growing with  
the west winds. Branches  
pointing east, a place of rest.





**Pink Twist, 2021**

Watercolour and pastel  
on rag paper laminated to canvas  
30 x 36 in



**Sleep, 2020**

Oil on Canvas

34 x 26 in

February day looking out on frozen Lake Superior. A submerged birch tree endures through dormancy - the deep sleep of winter.



**Smoke, 2022**

Oil on Canvas

30 x 40 in

An aged cedar stump pulled from the earth slowly melts back into the soil. The mystery of transformation continues behind the certainty of thought.



**Spirit, 2019**

Watercolour and pastel  
on rag paper  
28 x 21 in.





**Trunk, 2022**

Watercolour and pastel  
on rag paper laminated to canvas  
46 x 30 in

**Trunk (Study), 2020**

Watercolour and ink  
on rag paper  
10 x 7 in





**Uprooted, 2021**

Oil on Canvas

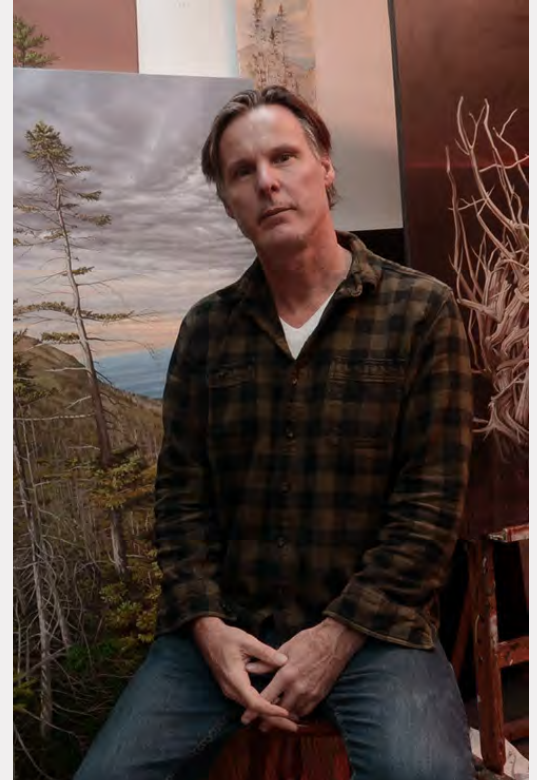
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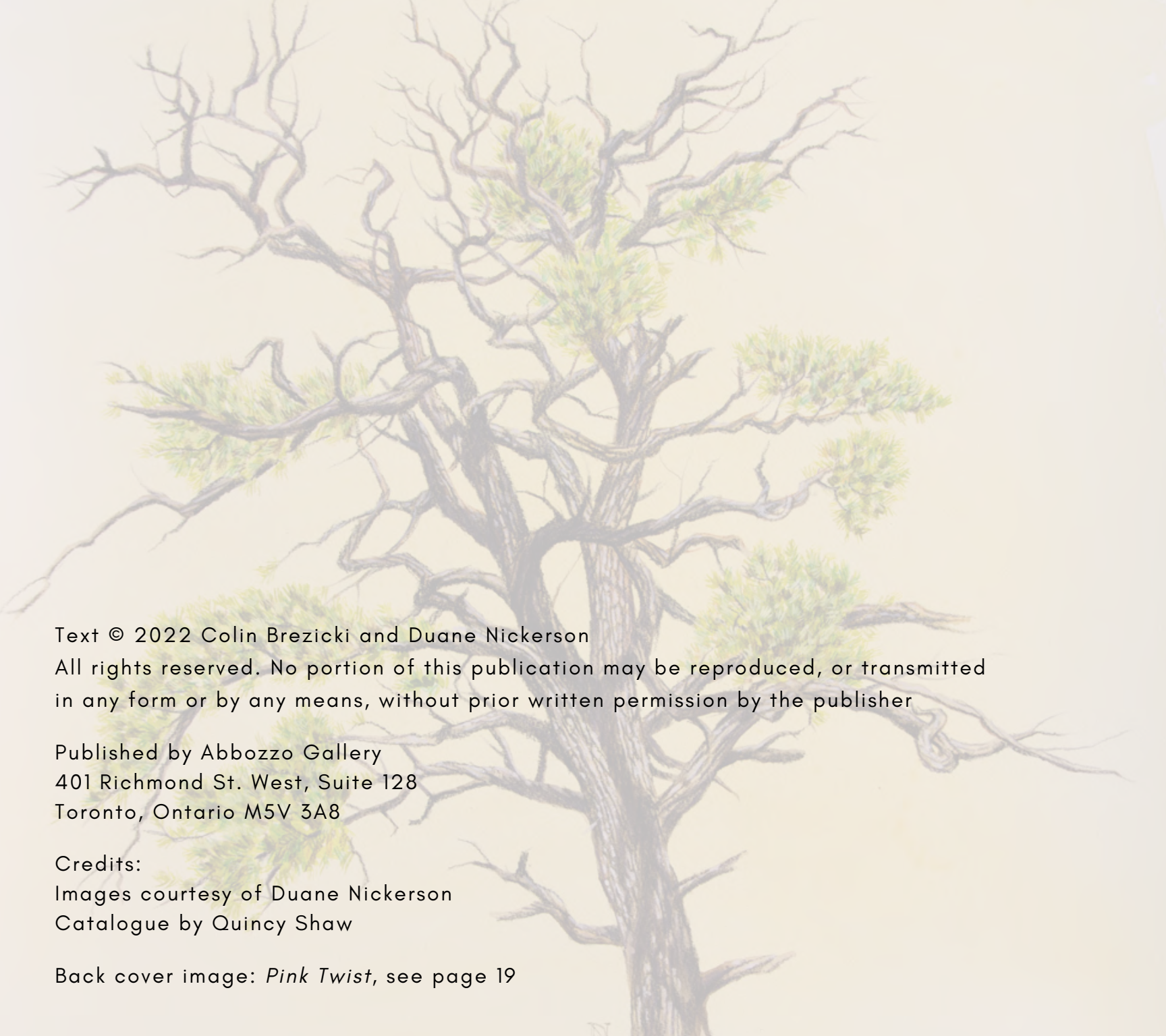
A ruin. A monument to wind, thin soil and future growth.

# Biography

Duane Nickerson is an award-winning, internationally recognized Canadian artist who lives and works near Toronto. Born in 1965 into a family of nine children in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Nickerson began painting in oils at 12 years of age. He earned a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Calgary in 1991 and the same year was awarded the Governor General's Gold Medal Award for Graduate Study.

Nickerson has travelled extensively, including a 7 year sojourn in Borneo. His paintings reside in public and private collections in Australia, Brunei, Canada, France, Korea, Mexico, Singapore, the UK and the United States. Oil painting is his primary focus, although he uses drawing and watercolour media to explore composition and gather ideas. His work has spanned a full range of subject matter from figure painting to still life to landscape. Throughout his career, Nickerson has engaged with in-depth exploration of surface and form, and his compositions often defy the conventions associated with traditional oil painting. He often refers to his painting process as: "gleaning meaning from the visual topography of my surroundings." His work is known for rigorous attention to technique, the use of archival quality artist materials and thematic concerns involving time and transcendence.





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