

# Horse Blankets

*By Neil Sternberg*

OIL ON CANVAS · STORY BY PATTI VIPOND

PHOTOGRAPH BY BEV MCMULLEN

Experimentation seems a natural direction for a self-taught artist, unburdened by the step-by-step approach to painting that formal training can produce.

For artist Neil Sternberg, that observation proves true. His self-education as a painter leads him to experiment as often as possible, stretching oil paints to use them in non-traditional ways and occasionally moving his canvas to the floor to craft the medium from above.

"I didn't paint with oils until I was 29 years old," says Sternberg, whose home and studio are located in Port Sydney across the road from the unique Indian Landing tree that is the subject of a series of his paintings. "I had painted with acrylic and watercolour but there was something I knew about oil, that this was the medium I wanted because it has a certain strength. I don't know what it is about the oil medium, but it has validity because it has been a constant in art for hundreds and hundreds of years."

That desire to innovate created a wonderful difference in his painting called *Horse Blankets*. When the artwork was completed, Sternberg felt that he wanted to do something more with it. With a technique using thinned oil paint, he could add an airy snow fall to the scene. However, this was a brand new idea and there was a real risk of losing the painting if it failed.

"It takes a lot mentally to say, 'I've gotten this far with the painting and it looks good,



and now I'm going to try this," explains Sternberg of the tranquil 60" x 42" work created during the brutal winter of 2013-14. "It takes a leap of faith, in a way. I'm trying to be less concerned now with the finished results, even be free enough to say I don't know where this is going and not caring if I make a mess."

Happily, the risk was well worth the effort. Two brown horses shod in blue blankets appear to be quietly wandering free through a light snowfall somewhere in the bush. The equines' appearance in this setting is arresting, but the artist has placed them down and to the side of the scene, almost overshadowed by a towering curtain of trees.

"That painting was inspired in a big way by the works of Canadian artist Jean Paul Lemieux, the way it is compositionally set up where the figures in the foreground are

right off to the side or near the edge of the painting," explains Sternberg. "It draws your eye off a bit and creates action. What really attached me to the horses was the blue in the landscape and the dark brown. By having a foreground image, I was almost more drawn to the forest curtain behind. I love the way the snow is just hanging in places in the trees."

The setting of *Horse Blankets* is a combination of a landscape on the way to Sternberg's parents' house near Port Sydney and a lofty line of pines on a bank right across from his family's home. Sternberg worked with reference photos to create the large painting but did not restrict himself to reproducing exact images.

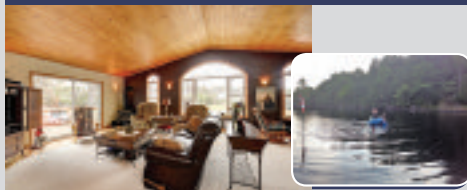
During his 20s, Sternberg's life focused on a different art form – music. As a bass player with bands in Toronto, he enjoyed some successes as a musician. But almost

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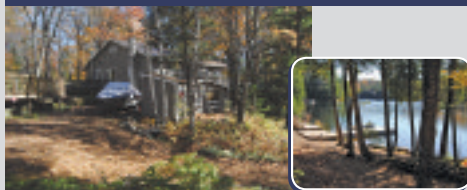
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overnight at age 27, Sternberg realized he’d had enough of loud musicians and creating with other people. At the same time, he remembered his childhood love of drawing and painting. A year of soul searching led him to train as an animator at a private art school in the city. But instead of animation, it was the life drawing classes that gripped him. With living costs in Toronto rising, Sternberg came up to Muskoka, built a cabin on his parents’ 26-acre property and started to paint.

“I spent eight years learning how to paint while doing a lot of general jobs,” says Sternberg, who always has music playing while in the studio. “Then I met my wife and moved into the village. For the past four or five years, my painting has been moving forward. I’m glad, in retrospect, that I taught myself to paint. It’s no knock on academic training, but I had already had enough of that to know that it can roost on your shoulders in different ways. Now, it’s more about looser and thinner. *Horse Blankets* is a little but fantastical and a little freer with a sense of space. I’m trying for another kind of reality rather than a very realistic kind of painting.”

Sternberg studied the work of other artists while learning how to paint, absorbing information by browsing the internet during a dull cubicle office gig and pouring over art books. As a part-time employee at the Huntsville Library, he has access to fabulous books on art and artists and urges those interested in art to do the same.

“When you get yourself a nice art book, maybe about Cezanne, really look at it,” he advises. “I spent a lot of nights in the cabin over an oil lamp staring at this stuff. I could see the artist started with, say, red ochre and then see the layers. It’s also important to look at art of all kinds. Picasso said that when he walked into someone’s house and there was the worst amateur type of painting, he would look at it and try to learn a bit.”

While on a family trip to museums in Montreal and Ottawa with his wife and son last February, Sternberg was inspired by great Canadian artists from the past like Jean Paul Limoux, Paterson Ewen and J.W. Morrice. Morrice was the son of a Montreal tycoon who painted in the late 1800s.

In August, Sternberg’s work was the subject of a successful three-week solo show at Partner’s Hall in the Algonquin Theatre in Huntsville. Earlier this year, he participated for the fourth time in the Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibition, a show he enjoys for its variety of art lovers and artists.

“I like doing the Toronto show because you meet a lot of people – ones who like your art and ones who are indifferent and walk right by,” says Sternberg, who is represented by the Eclipse Gallery at Deerhurst Inn. “Whatever, it’s good for building your thick skin. You meet a lot of interesting artists who elevate what you are doing in the long run.”

As well as preparing to open a gallery at his home in the near future, Sternberg is getting ready for an important show in the fall. From Oct. 24 to 26, his paintings will be part of the 24th Annual Autumn Art Show at the renowned McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinberg. Through his landscapes, the Muskoka artist will show the beauty of his home to art aficionados in southern Ontario.

“People don’t always know the paintings are of Muskoka, but they certainly connect with the northern landscapes,” says Sternberg. “It’s nice, like a calling card for the area. But, I try to go beyond that, too.”

*Neil Sternberg paints in his home studio in Port Sydney at 798 South Mary Lake Rd. His work can be seen at the McMichael Autumn Art Show at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection at 10365 Islington Ave. in Kleinberg from Oct. 24-26. To see more of Sternberg’s work or to contact him, call 705-385-1834 or go to [www.artofneilsternberg.com](http://www.artofneilsternberg.com).*