

Following a path *to* art

FOR THE LAST FEW YEARS, Waterloo native Phil Irish's paintings have had embedded within them a digital print of a map drawn by someone else.

"I collect stories from people about life-changing moments or turning points or places where something significant has happened," Irish explains. "So their story appears within the painting as a digital print, with their own handwriting and their map."

Irish, who has worked as an artist since 1995, stumbled on the unusual source of inspiration just as he was feeling somewhat bored with the direction his art was taking. While he was in Ottawa working on a project, a friend noticed that he seemed to be under stress. She drew him a map to a tree where she had often gone in similar times.

Although he was too busy to track down the tree, he kept the map and followed it when he returned to Ottawa a few years later. "It was such a cool thing because I was going to this place that didn't mean anything to me except that it meant so much to her," Irish says. "And then there was the challenge of wanting to draw it and not having much time. I felt very alive and in the moment and open to responding to everything."

Irish follows each map before beginning a painting. Because people's stories are different and the places are different, each painting has its own style.

"You'll see my interpretation of that place. Although I can't see everything that that person experienced, I do it with some empathy to their story. But maybe something completely different happens to me when I'm there, so really it's a conversation between two points of view."

At his shows, Irish creates a lounge space



Above: *Twas Now* (oil on panel with digital print of the map, 60 x 120 cm), 2006.

and invites people to leave him maps. "Once they've seen the paintings and sort of 'get' what I'm doing, they can sit down and share a map with me. I have hundreds of them."

Not every map that he follows ends up in a painting, of course, but Irish never feels the journeys are a waste of time. He once followed a map to a cemetery where, after several hours, he hadn't found much to inspire him. Then a cemetery worker drove up and started watering the plants, showing a nearby statue as well. The result was a vista of rainbows around a statue of Jesus.

"I just have to have patience and trust that something cool is going to happen," Irish says. "I just don't know what it is. If I had gotten bored and left, I wouldn't have seen that."

He has sketchbook drawings and two small studies based on that vision, and has already built a large panel for it. One day he'll start the painting that had its genesis at the cemetery.

He considers himself a man of faith and in some ways that shapes how he thinks about the world. Because of it, he wants to create art that is meaningful rather than simply



PHIL IRISH

There is a sense of hope and wonder in what I do ... and sometimes a critique of things gone awry.

Photographed in his Elora studio.

pretty. "Life is rich in meaning and I need to respond at that level. There is a sense of hope and wonder in what I do that comes from that, and sometimes a critique of things gone awry."

Irish's work will be on display at the K-W Art Gallery in January 2009. His show will be called *Watershed* in reference to both the Grand River watershed and the idea of a watershed moment.

You can see his work online at www.philirish.com



Above: *My Goal* (oil on panel, digital print), 70 x 150 cm), 2007.

At right: *Hidden Valley* (oil on panel, digital print, 110 x 150 cm), 2006.

