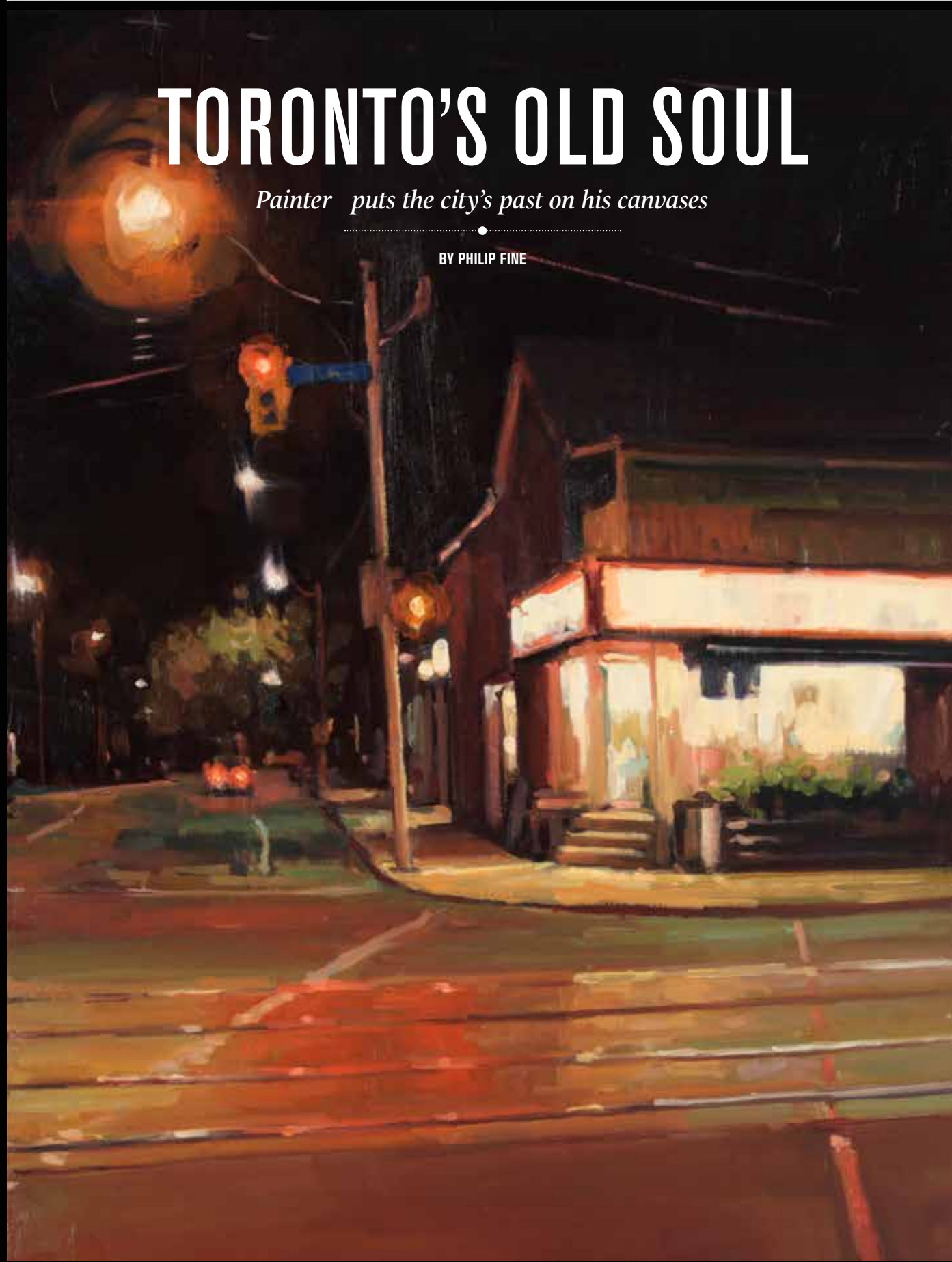


# TORONTO'S OLD SOUL

*Painter puts the city's past on his canvases*

BY PHILIP FINE



**MANY PEOPLE BUY BRIAN HARVEY'S PAINTINGS** to retrieve scenes of their youth. "They tell me 'I used to play in that laneway' or 'I would always go to that diner,'" says the 35-year-old Harvey, who grew up in Mississauga but has developed a successful career in art by portraying the vestiges of a bygone Toronto. "I've managed to capture the Toronto that I never directly experienced."

Harvey paints a historical Toronto of old

corner-store signs and laneway garages, of red-brick buildings, of alleys where telephone wires criss-cross over clotheslines, and of Chicago-school architecture. He also paints still lifes that enhance the beauty of ordinary domestic objects, and interiors, in which he focuses on special corners in a home.

Harvey received no formal training, but his childhood involved plenty of arts and crafts.

"My mom encouraged creativity," he says. "I would draw as a kid, stuff from my head: planes and trains. I would disappear into drawing and it passed the time." He recalls how he worked on old computer paper that came in reams of attached perforated pages. During his childhood, he deemed his older sister, Janette, to be the family artist, believing she drew better. He nevertheless kept trying to improve. 🎨



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ARTIST PROFILE  
Spring 2014

*(Opposite) Dundas and Coxwell, oil on wood panel, 2014*

*(This page) Gales, oil on wood panel, 2013*

Along the way, Harvey found inspiration and sought out the education and mentorship that eventually led him to realize he could turn art into a profession. After graduating from high school in 1997, he became interested in the burgeoning field of computer animation and enrolled at Seneca College, where he received a wide-ranging computer-art education; it spanned disciplines from life drawing to HTML. “But it wasn’t enough to get me a job,” he says.

He also believed that his computer animation education was lacking in fine-arts fundamentals, which led him to take night classes in life drawing at Sheridan College. During that same period, Harvey did some formative travelling. “I took a trip to Paris in 1999. Seeing the great paintings there had an effect on me,” he says. At the Musée d’Orsay, he was smitten by the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist period.

But it was the artists’ sketches more than their finished pieces that impressed him. “It was the immediacy of it, the energy and line work, and the feeling that I can do that,” he says. “I saw that drawings did not have to be perfect, that there has to be construction involved.”

It was at this point that Harvey committed himself to fine arts. He found a free three-year art program at Central Technical School’s Art Centre. “All the teachers there were practising artists—painters, sculptors, ceramicists, photographers and printmakers—who were exhibiting regularly and had a love for painting,” he says. “It was contagious.”

During that time, he visited galleries and viewed contemporary art. Being downtown, he was also discovering Toronto in all its gritty glory. He would carry around his sketchbook and draw buildings, alleyways and street scenes that were so different from those he had grown up with in Mississauga. He thinks his fascination with all things old may have emanated from one set of grandparents’ 1920 farmhouse near Chatham and his other grandparents’ post-war Toronto bungalow. He loved discovering all the old bric-a-brac in those two homes. “I’ve always been interested in the mundane things in history,” he says. ☞

*I took a trip to Paris in 1999. Seeing the great paintings there had an effect on me.”*



*Dupont and Spadina, oil on wood panel, 2014*



*Queen and Parliament, dusk, oil on wood panel, 2014*

*“Most art students work with acrylics, but there’s more versatility with oil.”*



*Red Garage, Leslieville, oil on wood panel, 2011*

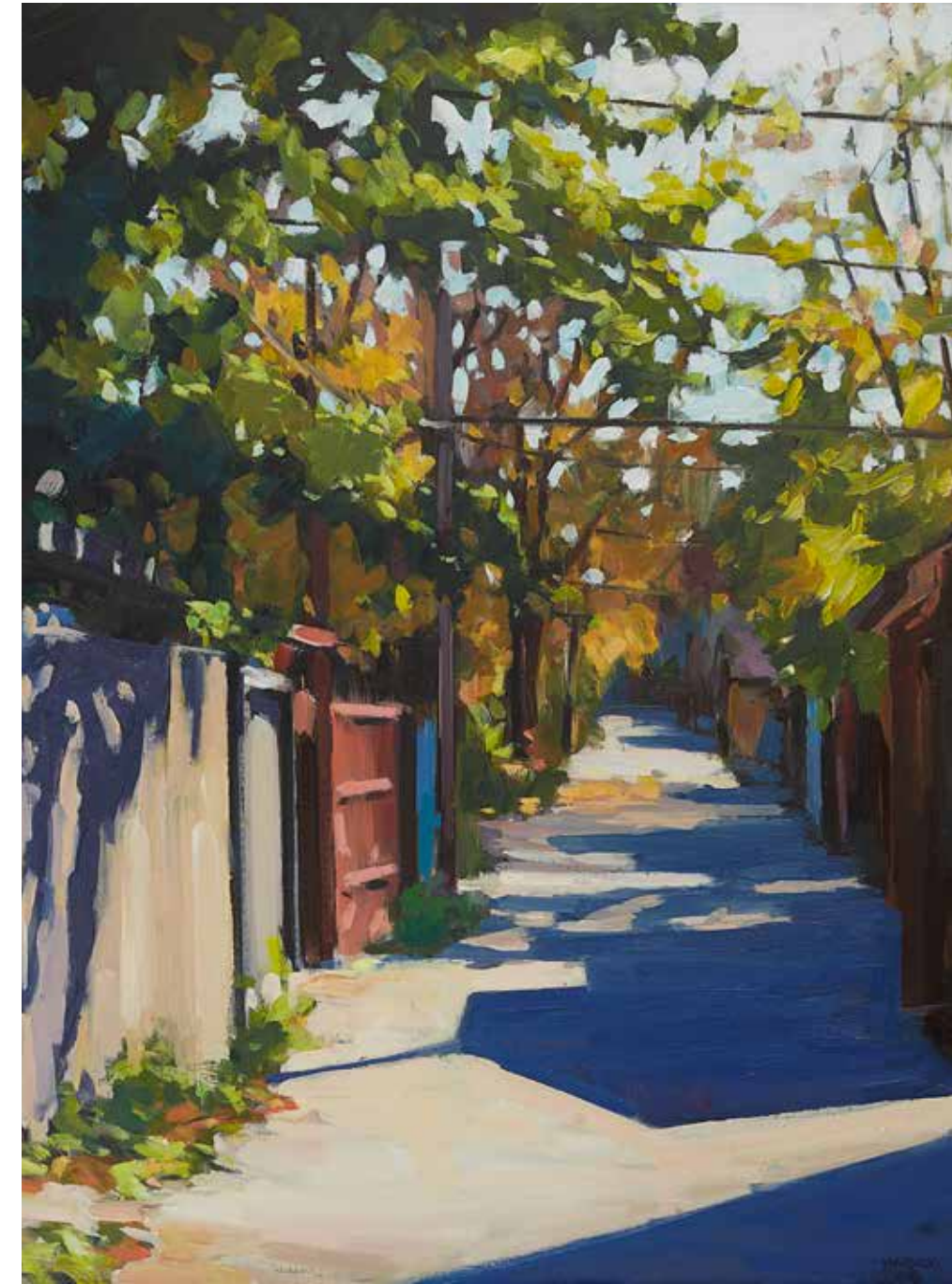
Harvey now works almost exclusively with oils, which he calls a forgiving medium. “Most art students work with acrylics, but there’s more versatility with oil,” he says. “It lends itself well to my ongoing attempts to get it right. You can paint wet over wet and wet over dry.”

His streetscapes, which are fairly literal, are usually bereft of people and cars. “It’s my attempt to make the landscape the character,” he says. And that character appears to connect with Torontonians, many of whom are now hanging Harvey’s view of the city in their homes.

For the past five years, he has achieved the ideal for a painter: making a living from his art. He regularly sells his paintings to both private and public collections. Privately, he’s represented by Canadian Fine Arts and Canvas Gallery in Toronto, and galleries in Vancouver and Ottawa. On the public side, his work has been bought by the Government of Ontario as well as the Toronto Public Library. That kind of recognition reminds him that his work is helping to preserve the old Toronto that has been disappearing in the wake of downtown condo development.

He’s currently preparing for some big Toronto shows, in which he hopes to participate again: the Riverdale Art Walk and the Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibition.

Harvey’s sister, meanwhile, now works in urban forestry and ecosystem restoration, but still likes to express herself through her camera. She has photographed many of her brother’s paintings and they have talked about doing a show together. As he finds layers of meaning in the back alleys of Toronto or tightens his focus on the wooden pole of a street lamp, Harvey can safely say that his sister is no longer the only artist in the family. ☛



*Leslieville, Laneway, oil on wood panel*