

The pursuit of a creative place

Melindria Tavoularis was searching for a rugged, wild, beautiful space to call home. From growing up in the clangorous liveliness of New York City to practising psychotherapy in Connecticut and Maine, she was drawn to the north, with its wide-open landscape and closeness to nature. Now the artist has settled where the Restigouche River meets the Bay of Chaleur, and has immersed herself in the creative community of northern New Brunswick. By Adam Hodnett

Melindria Tavoularis woke up suddenly in the middle of the night. She was in a “pop-up trailer,” in Sugarloaf Provincial Park. She and her husband had just bought a cottage in McLeods – between Campbellton and Dalhousie, in northern New Brunswick.

“What did we do?” they asked each other, momentarily panicked.

Tavoularis had come a long way, from growing up in New York City in the 1950s and ‘60s, to where the Restigouche

River meets the Bay of Chaleur.

She had been an accomplished artist in New York City, well before her long career as a psychotherapist. But after 2002, Tavoularis was fulfilling a promise she had made to herself – to be completely devoted to her art, like she had been once before.

After retiring, she and her husband, Gordon Johnson, drove across the United States, looking for a new place to live.

They travelled in their camper, with their doberman, Juno, and their orange-striped cat, Mistsou.

Back and forth across the continent they puttered, and they could find no better place to live than rural Maine. They were drawn to remote areas, and the inspiring landscapes.

But then they thought of further north, and Johnson began researching.

They bought a cottage in Campbellton as a vacation home in 2003. Three years later in 2006, Tavoularis hosted a retrospective art show at the Restigouche Gallery, the same year she got a

work permit as an artist. At the time, she was considered a cultural asset. The government was promoting economic incentives for the north shore, and Tavoularis’ work was inadvertently promoting the region. She was accepted as a permanent resident in New Brunswick in 2013.

Tavoularis has gone on to develop a “complex” life for herself, immersing herself into the art community of northern New Brunswick. She has become the vice-president of the Restigouche Multicultural Society, and is heavily involved in the communities of the area. She’s particularly active with the Bathurst Art Society and the Galerie Restigouche.

She continues to give abstract art lessons, and contribute her part in fostering the artistic talent of the region.

Tavoularis’ life winds back down through New England, to a youth in and around New York City, where she brushed up against many of the iconic elements of the time.

She’s the daughter of a paint chemist, and moved a lot while growing up. She had family that had immigrated as well, but her parents were barely even first-generation. Her father was born at a stop in England, shortly before crossing the Atlantic.

Her family lived outside the city, but she still grew to know it intimately. “Surrogate families” and friends often took her in, allowing her to go to school in the city.

She ended up going to New Lincoln High School, a famous progressive private high school where youth of all different backgrounds were able to attend. It exposed her to a unique mix of peers and ideas. She didn’t do particularly well, but she was still a curious and sensitive teenager, conscious of her artistic streak, in a historically important time and place.

“It was wonderful,” she says now. “That’s when all the things were happening.”

Whether drawing, or making up stories for a crowd of 20 neighbourhood kids, Tavoularis always had creative impulses. She took occasional courses, but was always a motivated self-learner. She even felt confident enough to apply to a high school specialized in art and music.

She was rejected. And devastated.

Her parents would later visit the school, and learn that it actually accepted all applicants, but considered the extreme commute Tavoularis would have to undertake daily to be too dangerous to travel alone.

“That was a little bit of a kick for me,” she says. “But I felt better, because I knew it didn’t reflect my art... After that I dabbed, but I think I felt a bit shattered by it. I didn’t get back into it until college.”

In the 1950s and ‘60s, Tavoularis grew through her teens and 20s in the bustling city that was going through its own cultural revolution, where musicians and artists were pushing boundaries, trying to get noticed through the noise.

“There were some wonderful, great things about it – I’m so glad I was in my 20s in that time.”

Art was important to Tavoularis, and when it came time to select a major, she chose art history. She graduated and was able to get work as a social worker for the city. She worked in Harlem, living throughout the city, and running in engaged and creative circles throughout her 20s.

Tavoularis always worked on her art, but was skeptical of fine arts programs and even on relying too heavily on any teachers, for that matter.

“I always believed it was important for me to find my own way,” she says.

Eventually she began a relationship with David McHugh – a composer who would go on to score films for Hollywood. Tavoularis was working on her masters in counselling. He was committed to his art and principles, and encouraged her to give as much attention to her art as she did anything else. Then, an opportunity came.

Tavoularis heard of cheap rental properties cropping up in neighbouring Pennsylvania. She and three artist friends jumped at the opportunity, renting a farmhouse on 150 acres of land. Everyone had a studio, and all the time in the world to create.

Tavoularis was often alone in the farmhouse with her painting and sculpture studios – and nine cats.

After the first year, the three other artists kept returning to the city more often. Everyone believed the place was

haunted, and only Tavoularis would stay alone in the countryside.

For two more years, Tavoularis would continue working on her art in the countryside. She described the time as “magical.”

“When I was put in a position of not having to think of anything except my art, it just exploded,” she says. “It was this huge thrust of energy into my work. I was doing things that was just shocking to me.”

Much of her development in those three years would set a course for the rest of her life.

“Everything that happened in those three years has been a continuation,” she says. “It’s been a continuity up to this day.”

Tavoularis made a conscious decision to create a consistent portfolio to showcase her work. It was ready by the end of the three years in the farmhouse, and she was able to spend her first year back in the city pounding the pavement and working hard to promote herself to the many galleries.

She would start working in her field again, while continuing to work on and promote her art, and McHugh’s music.

“It was a dog-eat-dog world,” she remembers. “Artists were desperate to make money. They were desperate to make connections. And in those days it was a dirty world, in the sense that it was either who you knew, who you slept with, or who you gave drugs to. I mean, it was nasty.”

“This is not the way I’m going to live my life,” she remembers telling herself. “It

was a very conscious decision on my part to leave the city when I did.”

She moved to Connecticut, and opened her own psychotherapy practice.

Art and psychotherapy have complimented each other well in Tavoularis’ life. “When you work on a piece – it’s a process,” she says. “There are areas that need to be worked out, so the piece works for you in the end. And when you’re a therapist – it’s like a puzzle. And as you’re gathering information as you’re going along, you’re solving the puzzle, until in the end you’re really able to help people actualize their highest selves.”

Some of the parallels in her two careers are obvious, and others hover below the surface.

“The thing that was always very interesting to me is that I could be working on one of my pieces of art, and I’d get to a point of: ‘OK, wow – this is tough.’ Go down... have a session or two with clients, get back to the studio and say – ‘I figured this out now.’”

For Tavoularis, both art and psychotherapy require a clear, indefinable, sense of completion to be successful. In one case, a painting took nearly 10 years before she considered it done. The process in both her pursuits are often similar, and sometimes, so are the goals.

“People have told me, when they look at my work that it’s very calming and meditative for them,” she says. “I was creating works that would hopefully

– as people viewed them – would see the beauty of nature around them.

“You know, sometimes when someone’s [having trouble], and then they go out and they take a walk in the woods. And they smell stuff. And there’s calmness around us. Or what they perceive to be calmness, [it’s soothing]... Nature is very soothing. Unless you’re standing underneath a volcano.”

The changes in her approach to painting nature are among the most obvious and telling in her life. There’s been a clear move from abstracted to increasingly detailed work. While not a conscious change, Tavoularis finds the development to be connected to her outlook.

“At least for myself – as I’ve grown older – I think about life in a lot more detail than I did when I was younger,” she says. “You’re seeing other things. It’s like the unveiling of the onion.”

It’s one the many fascinating aspects of growing older.

“The beauty of aging is that you go through all kinds of different phases,” she says. “Each level is like, ‘Wow – this is a whole new trip! Seriously, it’s like a whole new experience. It’s fascinating.’”

Tavoularis and Johnson were blown away by the Restigouche region. They had researched the area, but really didn’t know what to expect.

“Wow – where are we?” she remembers thinking, when they first arrived. She was shocked to realize the

Appalachian Mountains – where she had spent so much of her time in the United States – stretched through New Brunswick, into Quebec. The decision to come in the first place was made in large part by the City of Campbellton’s website, the tri-cultural foundation, and the warmth of the Bay of Chaleur. The decision to stay only took the view.

“It was like love at first sight,” she says. “We hadn’t even seen Bathurst.”

They attempted to explore more. Miramichi had been marked before they ever left for Canada. One day, they left the mountains, and made their way to Miscou Island, at the tip of the Acadian Peninsula. After six hours of driving, they turned around and went straight back to Campbellton. They arrived at midnight. They ended up buying the first cottage they were shown. It’s been their only home since 2012.

Tavoularis has gone on to find different groups and communities to create a complex and fulfilling life for herself in northern New Brunswick. Its art scene suits her perfectly.

“In New York, it was hard,” she says. “The artist community... was so stressed, and so high powered, and so competitive, that I didn’t really have a lot of artist friends.”

Now she’s learning French. She recognizes that a lot what the arts is in New Brunswick is francophone. She’s impressed with “harmonious” groups, and knows that people – like the director of the Galerie Restigouche, Charline Lanteigne – sees art as community, a

belief Tavoularis shares.

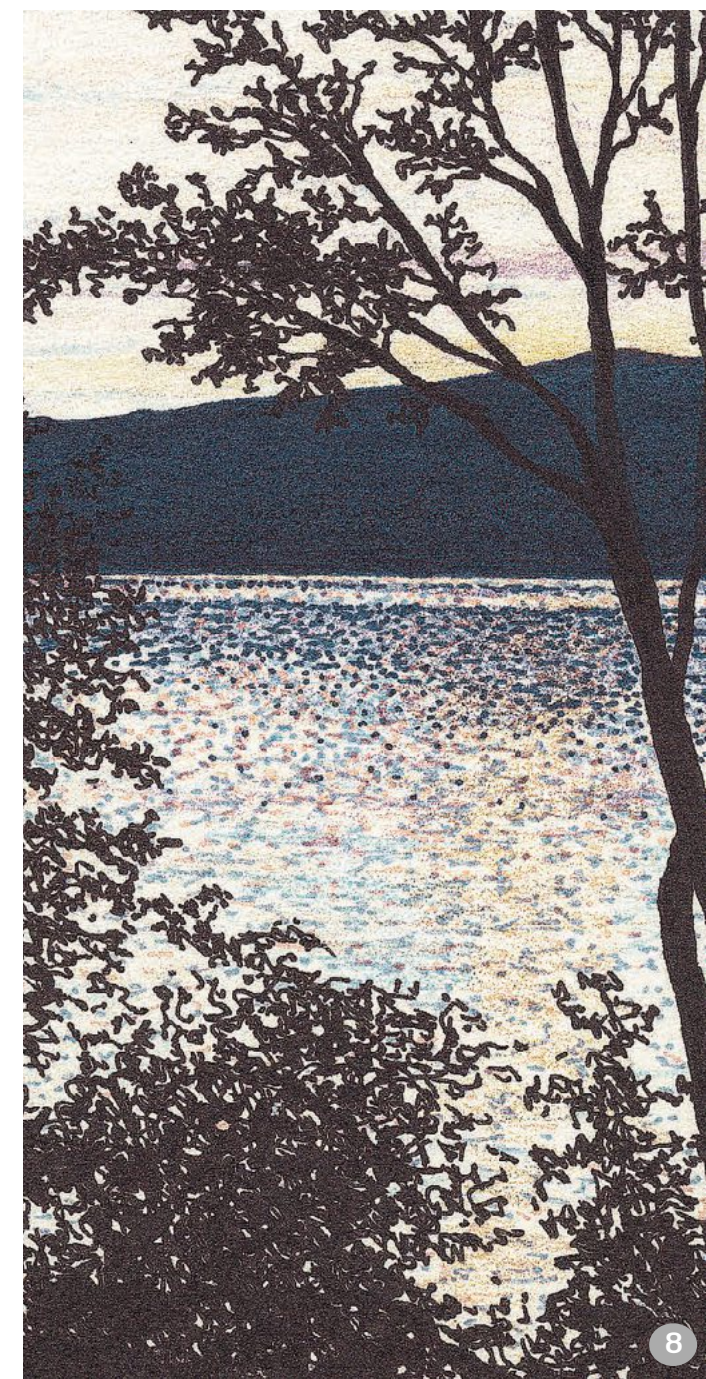
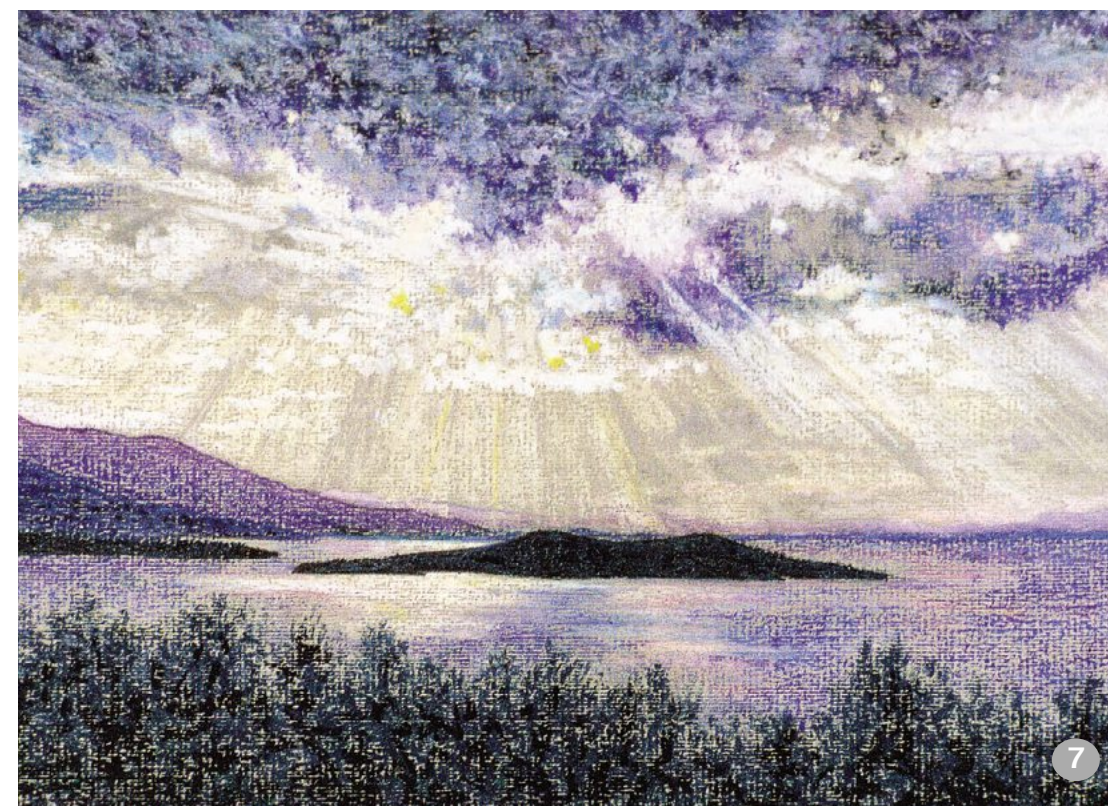
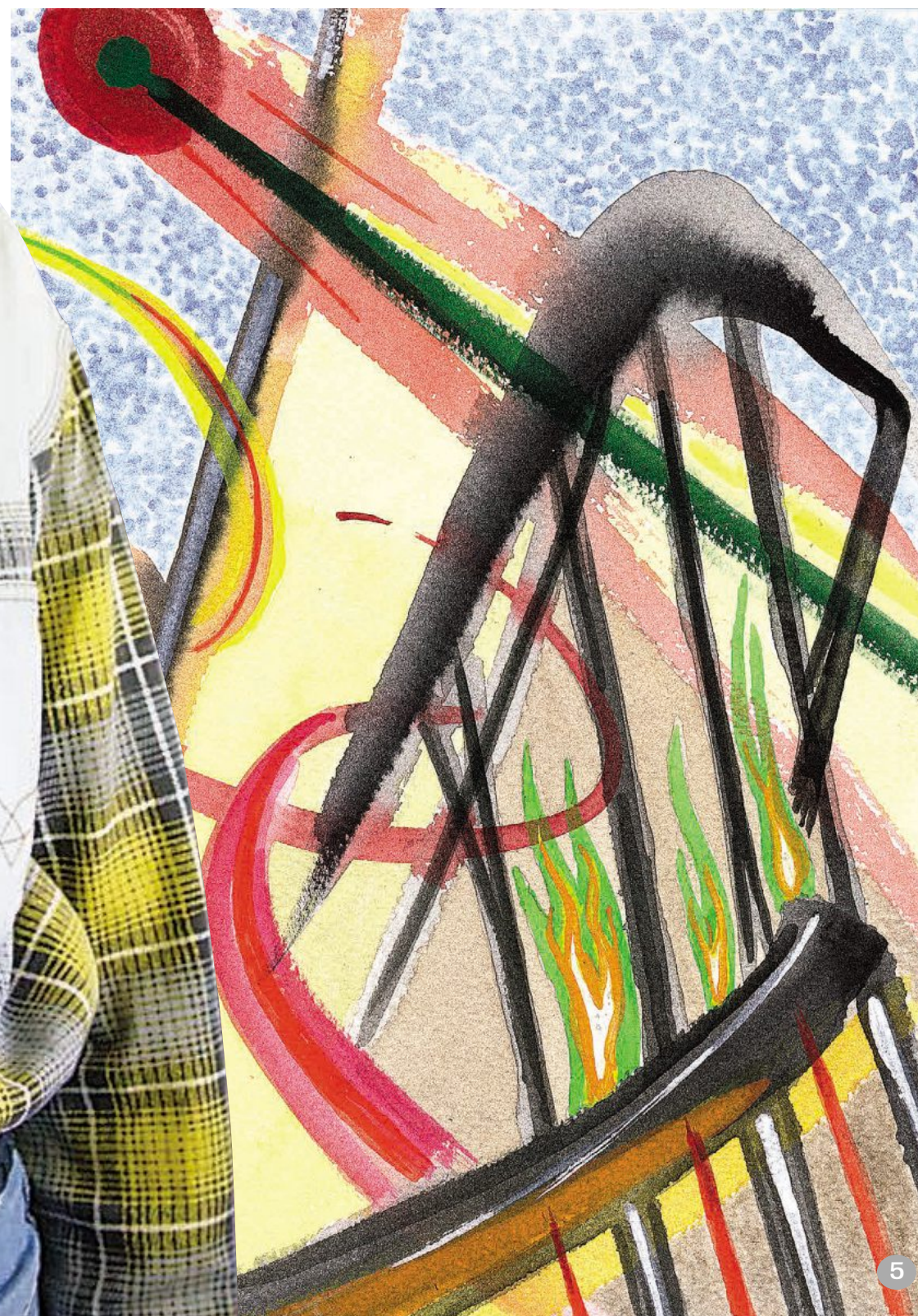
“I definitely choose this way. It’s so much colder the other way, and kind of cutthroat,” she says, referring to the supportive arts communities in northern New Brunswick as opposed to the metropolitan to the south where she spent her younger years. She shed the stress, the competitiveness, the intensity of the New York art world for companions, friendships, and communal creativity.

“There’s a lot of camaraderie and friendship.”

As a teenager, Tavoularis was reading about famous painters when she came across Camille Pissarro. The Danish-French painter is often thought of as a father figure to the famous impressionist and post-impressionist painters of the time, including Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh. An important artist himself, he was also known to be kind and warm-hearted. He taught and encouraged the developing artists around him.

“I thought it was so great that he was so generous, in so many ways... It formed like a real community,” Tavoularis says, sitting in her small home studio on the water, beside the big wooden desk that has been with her since her days in New York. “Maybe that stuck with me, all the way through – here I am, arriving in a place where that [kind of community] actually can be the situation.”

Adam Hodnett is a freelance writer and videographer based in northern New Brunswick



1. 2004, Through the Chic Chocs / Gaspésie, Québec; 12" x 16"; medium: watercolor. 2. 1990, Bend in the River, Connecticut; 18" x 37.5"; mediums: watercolor and India ink. 3. 1977, Dunes; 15" x 29"; mediums: watercolor and India ink. ART: MELINDRIA TAVOULARIS 4. 2009, Un gentilhomme acadien; 8.6" x 8"; mediums: mixed. Art: Melindria Tavoularis 5. 2011, Transformation; 9.9" x 7"; medium: watercolor. 6. 2003, Flo's Field, Maine; 23.5" x 36.2"; medium: watercolor. 7. 2000, Sunset / Moosehead Lake, Maine; 8.3" x 12"; mediums: oil pastel and coloured pencil. 8. 2004, Summer Evening II / Restigouche River, NB; 7.3" x 6.8"; mediums: mixed. 9. 1989, View of Trade Tower, NYC; 47" x 30.2"; mediums: watercolor and India ink. ALL ARTWORK BY MELINDRIA TAVOULARIS; PHOTO OF MELINDRIA TAVOULARIS BY ADAM HODNETT