

Gooderham artist brings new flavour to Highlands East Studio Tour



By Jenn Watt

Down the Tamarack Lake Road past where pavement meets gravel, after you've rounded corners lined with thick forest and a few country lots, you'll find an old farmhouse surrounded by flourishing hydrangeas and trumpeting day lilies.

Once the home of the Madills in 1880 and the Stoughtons after that, it is now the bustling farm/studio/home of Samantha Vanderwyst and Jason Kozlowski and their three children.

Samantha Vanderwyst savours living in the middle of the wilderness, where the family lives primarily off of the land, and that is reflected in the art she creates.

"I have an underlying theme to pretty much everything that I do creatively. I always have at the back of my head that there's an interconnectedness of everything ? absolutely everything,?" she says, sitting at the dining room table in her home a few days before the Highlands East Studio Tour.

"I'm so aware of that, especially living on the land.?"

Vanderwyst is Studio D and is new not only to the art tour, but also to the community.

She and Kozlowski moved into their new home in Gooderham just before Christmas. Before that they lived in Buckhorn and prior to that Oakland, Calif., though Vanderwyst points out she is Canadian.

The pair has always been interested in art and sustainable living.

"We're trying to be as self-sufficient as we can. We grow a lot of our own food. We do everything by hand, basically. We're creative people. It's fun for us, but it's a lot of work,?" she says.

Vanderwyst has done illustration work for magazines and newspapers and her art echoes that experience. Undulating inky lines create the forms of animals ? owls, foxes, rabbits ? and the wilderness around them. Humans feature in some of her work with rosy cheeks and hair that seems to reject the Earth's gravitational pull. Intricate patterns, bright colours and whimsical shapes emerge in her work, which is featured not only as prints, but on wooden pendants and even barn floorboards.

While fixing up the barn on their new property, the couple had to pull up the floorboards in the loft. Vanderwyst thought they would make a good base to work on, like a canvas.

"They're no good for anything else, but I think they're so beautiful,?" she says.

She makes children's blocks out of wood with illustrations and letters of the alphabet and she gathers wool from her sheep to make felted items.

Since 2007, Vanderwyst has been selling her work on Etsy, an online storefront. While some items sell faster than others, she says the market hasn't changed what she produces.

"I can't make stuff that I don't love to make. I don't want to be a manufacturer. I still want to be an artist,?" she says.

Truly a lifelong artist, she says she has been drawing since before she could walk ? sometimes frightening adults by wielding a pencil as a toddler.

She later went on to study Toronto School of Art.

Living off the land and homeschooling two of her three children doesn't provide much time for art, but Vanderwyst says putting in time being creative is essential.

"I sit here in this chair at night when the kids go to bed and that's when I do everything," she says, pointing to a plush-looking armchair beside the dining table.

"I work from morning till night with the kids. If I don't find a place for the creative outlet I feel like I'm going crazy. It brings me so much joy. I would say it's very cathartic too," she says.

You can meet Vanderwyst, see her studio and art and buy some, too, on the Highlands East Studio Tour Aug. 8 and 9, 15 and 16. She is located at 1429 Tamarack Lake Rd., about five minutes south of Gooderham off of County Road 507 (Buckhorn Road). You can view her work online at www.pipodoll.etsy.com. For more information on the tour or Vanderwyst's work, check out the studio tour website: www.highlandseastartour.com.