

# GROUP OF *One*

by Janet Jarrell

It is 1971 and, at the age of 16, this free-spirited and independent adventurer headed west, hitchhiking across Canada with little more than a backpack full of art supplies and an open mind. After spending a summer exploring the West Coast, she hitchhiked back home to Toronto, only to return to BC a year later. Dania made Richmond Island her home, studied at the Vancouver School of Art and spent the next few years absorbed in the beautiful landscapes, rich native cultures and the slower-paced lifestyle that BC had to offer.

Ready for the next chapter in her life, the Toronto art scene was “where it was all happening” and Dania was on her way. She was accepted at the prestigious Ontario College of Art (now OCAD University) on a grant. Not one to conform, Dania used the grant money to purchase more art supplies and spent the next two years auditing classes of her choice at OCA. It was there she met Graham Coughtry and Gordon Rayner; these successful artists became mentors who inspired Dania with their unique approach to art.

Her next move forward was to attend George Brown College where she studied commercial art. She started working as a graphic designer and, although talented, her heart remained in her own free style of art.

It was around this time that Dania met her future husband, Al Lerman, a multi-instrumental musician and vocalist; he is the bandleader of the successful group known as Fathead. This began a decade of travel, live music and the birth of a new series of paintings for Dania. Great blues musicians like Muddy

Waters, Lightnin’ Hopkins and Big Bill Broonzy inspired a collection whereby Dania sketched the artist during the live performance, capturing the energy and the essence of the moment. Then, at home, while listening to their music, she added watercolour and oil pastels to finish the piece. The success of this group of paintings was displayed during solo art shows, one at the ‘Squeeze Club,’ that also led to interviews on CBC’s Sunday Arts and Entertainment and Bravo’s Talkin’ Blues.

Dania was once again ready for a change. She described the need to “stretch out, get out of her comfort zone and move forward. Painting the same thing again and again feels repetitive after awhile – change feels exciting. I need to change to be true to myself.” However, life had a different plan. Al and Dania found their aging parents needed help. “When you take care of your parents, you really learn that the most important things in life are love and compassion.”

Dania speaks passionately about her life work, its changes, challenges and focus on “directing energy into something positive.” In Toronto, she led art workshops for Youth Without Shelter, a program offering a safe and supportive environment where kids could come and eat nutritious food and accomplish something positive. She believes in feeding the artist, both inside and out, with good food, confidence and the skills they need to find their own way. Although she admits the work can be emotionally exhausting, it is good, healing work. “Art saved me. It was there through thick and thin, and has been a positive focus of my energy.”

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Dania painting in studio

Her collections are varied, using many different styles and mediums. Her work reflects her inspirations including the Group of Seven, the Impressionists, aboriginal art and many more. Painting for Dania is a dance. “It leads a little bit, then you lead – you work at it, then you put it away, it goes back and forth.”

Today, we find the artists, Dania and Al, living in the country where they are inspired by the beautiful landscapes. Their home was built by the river and designed for environmentally sustainable living. They are surrounded by wildlife which is inspiring Dania’s next stage in the creative process: “the animals are coming.”

*Dania Madera-Lerman has had numerous solo and group showings and her works are collected by both the public and private sectors. She lives on 45 acres of sprawling, rugged terrain at the base of the Canadian Shield just north of Havlock. Visit [www.daniaspaintings.com](http://www.daniaspaintings.com).*

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