



*In the Shadows/American Yellow Fly Agaric*



*Fungi Family/Reddish Brown Bitter Boletes*

# A FASCINATION FOR FUNGI

BY LAURIE LAMOUNTAIN

If you spent any time in the woods last summer and fall, you no doubt noticed an inordinate amount of mushrooms in varying shapes, sizes and colors. Artist Wendy Newcomb not only noticed them but was compelled to capture them on canvas.

As a self-described representational painter, Wendy primarily and prolifically renders the many landscapes of Maine. What strikes me most about her paintings is her uncanny ability to capture light, whether it's bouncing off snow in a sunlit forest or reflecting on the clapboards of an old yellow cape or swirling in a river eddy. Her allegorical paintings depict many of the same landscapes with the addition of often humorous and sometimes sobering surrealistic effects. Her mushroom paintings, however, are a distinct departure from both genres. The combination of subject matter, color, and perspective (close-up) comprise a series of paintings that border on the abstract.

It's not the first time Wendy has gotten up-close-and-personal with her subject matter. Pond lilies, barnacles, ice dams, and dead leaves have all received her undivided attention on canvas, but there's something about her mushroom paintings that sets them apart. They have an arresting and almost animate quality that is, no doubt, what attracted her to them in the first place.

The interesting thing is that before last summer, Wendy had very little interest or knowledge of mushrooms and wouldn't have known a Bolete (mostly edible) from an Amanita (often poisonous).

"I walk a lot and anywhere I happened to go it was like, 'wow, look at that mushroom! I didn't see that yesterday.' I kept seeing more and more of them and it was pretty exciting, especially since they're so quick to come up—and then they disappear! Then I watched that movie *Fantastic Fungi* and got even more interested," Wendy recalls. "So I collected a lot of imagery over the summer. Every chance I got I was on the ground taking pictures of mushrooms and I just decided I was going to do this whole series [of paintings] on mushrooms."

For a painter who loves light, when Wendy sat down to review her mushroom photographs in preparation for painting them, she was faced with the sudden realization that she had overlooked the obvious: mushrooms grow in shade and shadow. She briefly questioned whether or not her idea was worth pursuing, but ultimately the mushrooms challenged her to find light in different ways. They became studies in contrasts for her. She was also afraid there was going to be no color and again she was challenged to find it in other ways. In many ways, the mushrooms made her think outside the box. Making all thirteen paintings roughly the same size (8x8") also challenged her sense of composition.

"I wanted to make them small enough so that they would be more of an intimate painting. Part of the adventure was getting to know the mushrooms visually. I knew nothing about whether they were edible or poisonous. It's just visually I was so excited about the colors and the gills and how they would emerge through the dead leaves. And because I was doing them small, it did present a design issue of how to put them on the page."

Wendy's painting practice is to start with a pencil sketch and then do a gouache study before she commits to oil on canvas. The sketch and study serve as stepping stones that allow her to figure out if a painting is going to work or not.

"They're never exactly the same as that final painting but it's a way to get me there. It's a way to figure out the color, the light, to see can I make this? I don't want to invest a lot of time into something that I don't know where I'm going. Inevitably I'm open to changing it as I go on; it's not like I have to stay with the sketch."

In order to title the paintings, Wendy needed to identify the mushrooms, so she reached out to a local forager/identifier who requested she email images and kindly provided her both Latin and common names.

It's clear in talking with Wendy that mushrooms have ignited her artistically. She feels painting them has been a more intimate experience than painting landscapes. Their shape and texture naturally inclined her to a more abstract and painterly expression of them, rather than an illustrative, almost textbook interpretation. As a result, all the mystery and excitement she experienced in discovering them comes through. There's a metaphor to be found in a heartshaped mushroom called Deceiver, humor in a



*Jubilee/Black Trumpets*



*Heartfelt/The Deceivers*

cluster of Bitter Boletes titled "Fungi Family," intimacy in a pair of Heath Waxcaps named "Tête à Tête," and tenderness in two Goldstocks titled "Offspring."

Beyond a sense of connection, she has a sense of communication. She feels there's a reason all these mushrooms are suddenly emerging. It's as if the Earth is really speaking to us right now and mushrooms are among the many messengers imploring us to "pay attention."

"There is a message there. It's like they were there all along but I never saw them. Or I saw them but not really? It's like I've made new friends," says Wendy. ✨

A selection of Wendy's mushroom paintings will be on display in June at Hole in the Wall Studioworks in Raymond. Her work will also be on view at "Fresh Perspectives," a four-woman show at HITW that runs from August 13 to October 2.