

100-Mile palette

Artist creates icons from pigments made from natural materials within 100-mile radius



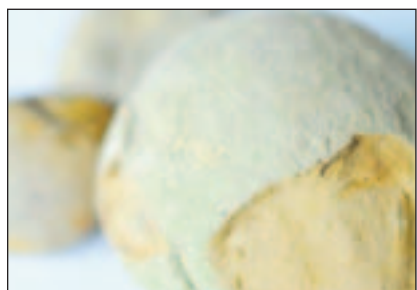
Galena from Dundas makes grey.



Sphalerite from Dundas and Flamboro makes zinc beige and white.



Ochre from Cambridge makes orange ochre.



Ochre from Conestogo makes brown sienna.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHILIP WALKER, RECORD STAFF

Christopher van Donkelaar shows pigments that he makes from natural materials within a 100-mile radius of Cambridge.

By Amy Fuller, Record staff

CONESTOGO — Along a gravel path by Chip's Garage in Conestogo sits a red-brick home with weathered gingerbread trim. Out back, chickens and roosters strut and crow within their sloped pen by the shed.

Christopher van Donkelaar stands framed in the doorway of the shed. Given the setting, you might mistake him for a farmer.

The "shed" actually houses a studio, where van Donkelaar works as an iconographer. In the window-lined back room of the small structure, he paints two-dimensional religious figures and symbols using rich colours, clean lines and burnished gold. Churches, galleries and individuals commission his icons.

"I've been an iconographer for almost a decade now," he says. "This is what I do and what I am. I don't paint landscapes or portraits, I paint icons."

He studied church history at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ont., and follows the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition, which venerates images of Christ and the saints.

As a student visiting a monastery in Ohio, he came to the aid of a short monk struggling to reach the centre of a pantocrator (a dome-shaped painting of Christ) with his trowel.

The monk sensed that his helper had artistic talent (as well as long arms) and suggested he learn iconography. Now 34, van Donkelaar has been practising the art for 10 years.

But like a farmer, van Donkelaar has a special affinity for the natural environment.

That's why he has embarked on a six-month project called 100 Mile ART, a takeoff on *The 100-Mile Diet*, a Vancouver couple's plan to eat food grown within a 100-mile radius of their apartment.

(Alisa Smith and James MacKinnon documented their adventure in this year's One Book, One Community selection for Waterloo Region, *The 100-Mile Diet*.)

As artist-in-residence at the Cambridge Centre for the Arts, van Donkelaar is extending the concept of responsible eating to his work. He plans to create an icon made entirely from natural materials within a 100-mile radius of the centre.

"We participate daily with food," he says. "I want art to show that, too — it's responsible beauty."

The project focuses on the process leading up to the painting as much as the icon itself.

Van Donkelaar posts updates about his progress almost daily at www.100mileART.com.

Now two months into the project, he has travelled to places like Paris, Dundas and Flamboro to gather galena, maganite, celestite, sphalerite and ochre — minerals he grinds with a cast iron mortar and pestle into a rainbow for his palette.

He's also growing a flowering plant called woad that produces blue dye, to make up for the absence of Azurite within the 100-mile limit. He'll do without the gold, silver and copper that normally feature prominently in his icons.

The project culminates on Sept. 26, when the centre will host an exhibition of the painting, titled *The Naming of the Animals*.

As visitors enter the gallery, they will see van Donkelaar's depiction of Adam seated in the Garden of Eden, naming each creature.

Van Donkelaar explains that in carrying out the task, Adam does more than make sound effects; he's recognizing the essence of each animal.

"He's creating," van Donkelaar says. "That tells me we can have such a positive impact. People know we can abuse our position, but we can also create beautiful things rightly."

The gallery will showcase the "devolution" of the icon, too, moving from powdered pigments to the crushed rocks they came from, then rough boulders and finally, the trees that supplied the surface for painting.

For now, van Donkelaar continues to gather



A rainbow of colours from natural materials.



Maganite from Kettle Point makes black.



Celestite from Dundas makes white.

materials. Around the corner and down a hill from his studio, he walks through thistles and tall wet grass by the Conestogo River; looking for clay deposits where pigment rocks become lodged.

He tromps happily through the muck, stooping to examine tadpoles and a toad and digging his fingers into the clay to unearth stones.

Van Donkelaar sees the floodplain with eyes attuned to colour, paying attention to otherwise insignificant pebbles.

He scratches one stone against another. If a white mark appears, he tosses the stone into the river. If yellow, red or a soft beige emerges, he pockets the stone.

Back in the studio, he pounds a good one into fine powder, then dumps it onto a smooth white tile and adds water.

Then he clasps the handle of a glass muller, a bell-shaped tool with a flat surface five centimetres across. He swishes the muller around the tile, getting rid of grit as he makes figure-eights with the pigment.

At the end, a thin, wet layer of beige remains. Van Donkelaar scrapes it into the center of the tile with a palette knife and leaves it to dry.

This is where the chickens come in. Like everything else in his backyard, the little flock plays no small part in the project. Van Donkelaar keeps a rotund silver dorking and a red Dutch welssummer among others, vanishing breeds that produce dark red eggs.

After cracking open an egg, he'll separate the yolk from the white and add water. Then he draws the mixture into a syringe, squirts a small amount into the dried pigment powder and voila — a tablespoon of egg tempera paint, ready for the brush.

"It's the same process as naming the animals," he says. "Play with what's been created. Name the animals or create a picture."

"I know we can do wonderful things."

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