

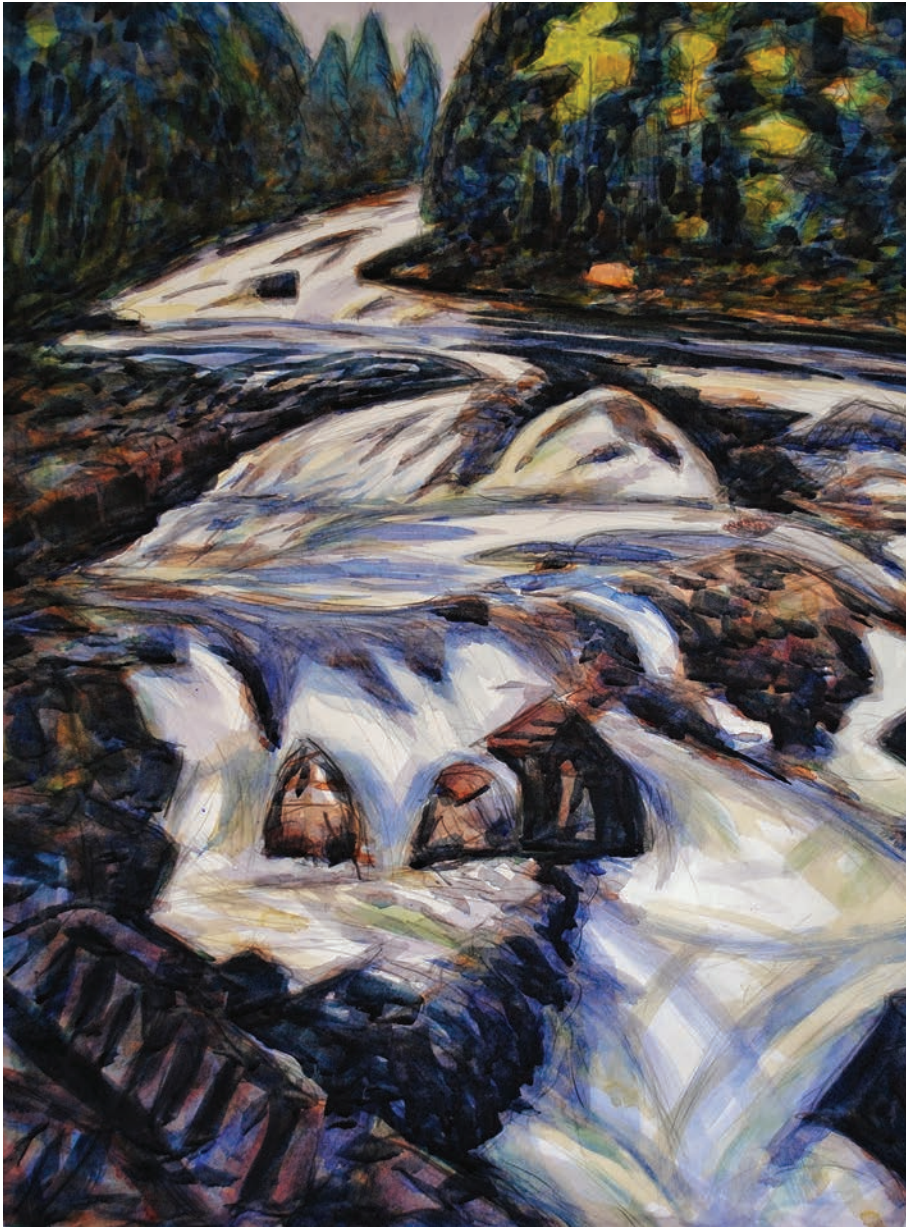


# Beyond The Law: John Carnes

Interview by Daniel J. Murphy  
Photos by Joe Sato Murphy  
Artwork images supplied by John Carnes

For John Carnes to find inspiration, he does not need to go far. From his perch at the Artdogs Studio in Gardiner, Carnes has an enviable view of the Kennebec River, which is always within earshot. Although these roaring waters may at times tempt him to reach for his fishing rod, he has found his life's work in creating artworks that interpret and express his own experience with the region's natural beauty. Carnes, who formerly served as counsel for the Maine Human Rights Commission, spent time with the *Maine Bar Journal* to discuss his interests.





Rapid River, Maine

**MBJ:** Could you tell our readers about your interest in painting?

JC: Like most artists, my interest started when I was a child. My parents were supportive enough to make sure I took some drawing lessons at the local university. But in high school my interests turned to science and history. I graduated from Boston University School of Law, but then after a stint in the Army, I enrolled at an art school in Cambridge, Mass. I spent several years attempting to be an art photographer in Boston and up here in Maine, just about starving to death. My wife, Kate, was supportive of all of my artis-

tic endeavors, but once our first child was born, it was clear that I needed to settle down and get a paying job, so to speak.

**MBJ:** Is this when you commenced your legal career?

JC: At that point I had that law degree in my pocket and took a job with a Maine state agency and worked there for a couple of years. Then, a fantastic opportunity came my way. The Maine Human Rights Commission hired me as their legal counsel. I stayed there for about 25 years and absolutely loved the job. This was a time when cases

involving sex discrimination, harassment, age discrimination, and disability rights were all new. I was fortunate enough to participate in taking many of those issues up to the Law Court. In 1991 I began painting part time. By 2005 I realized that that was what I really wanted to do full time, so I retired from the Commission and set up my studio/gallery at Artdogs Studios in downtown Gardiner. I've just been a fortunate guy who loved his legal job and has an absolute passion for his painting job.

**MBJ:** How often do you paint during a typical week?

JC: When I first started, the first few years, I probably worked six days a week. Now, I work about five days a week. I get to the studio about 9:00 or 9:30 in the morning and work until 5:30 or 6:00 in the evening.

**MBJ:** What media do you use for your painting?

JC: I work in watercolor, gouache, pastel, and graphite on various papers and plastic sheets.

**MBJ:** Let me ask you about painting in different styles. Two of your works struck me—"Rapid River, Maine" and "Maine Autumn." They are both striking in their own way, but very different in style. Can you tell us about "Rapid River, Maine"?

JC: That painting was inspired by one of my favorite places, the Rapid River, which is located in the western mountains of Maine near where we have a family camp. In this painting I am trying to express the energy, direction, power, and continuous movement of this singularly beautiful natural place. I use broad sweeping gestural graphite lines to begin and then build up successive layers of watercolor wash and graphite.

**MBJ:** Could you tell us about the painting "Maine Autumn"?

JC: That one also is a water color. The painting began stream side in central Maine. It may have more to do with the relationships among abstracted



shapes and colors than it does with describing a specific place. It is definitely about the formal aspects of color and shape; you have to figure out how the colors talk to each other. But I think it also represents the beautiful Maine landscape we get to experience in the fall.

**MBJ: What satisfaction do you obtain from painting?**

JC: I think I am compelled to use these materials and make these images.

It's a bit of a paradox. I don't work at it, but I work very hard. I don't know what I would do if for some reason I couldn't come into the studio and work. It's kind of a crazy thing. I'm just very happy when I'm doing it. If I take a break from it, within a few days, I am very eager to get back into the studio or out on location.

**MBJ: Why is art important in our world?**

JC: I think making and viewing art provides a time and place, out of the hustle and bustle and demands of everyday life, where the artist can attempt to communicate to another human being something of his or her experience of life. I think the other thing that can happen is that it becomes an opportunity for the viewer to begin thinking and feeling about their own emotional reactions to the experiences in their own life. I think art is a valuable resource for all of us. It can be stimulating and comforting.

**MBJ: Have you found any intersection between the legal world and your art?**

JC: My daughter recently graduated from the University of Maine School of Law. Liz has a special interest in intellectual property law and legal ser-

vices to under-served populations. We often discuss legal issues that can arise for artists, issues involving copyright, contracts, galleries, and so on. I always like to get her take on these matters.

**MBJ: What's the best advice you've ever received?**

JC: Other than my mother's advice to look both ways before crossing the street, I guess it would come from a little note that is tacked up on my bulletin board. It has to do with dealing with criticism and self-doubt. The French artist Jean Cocteau said, "Listen carefully to first criticisms made of your work. Note just what it is about your work that critics don't like and cultivate that. That's the only part of your work that's individual and worth keeping." Sometimes if I get a bad review or somebody comes in and they don't like a piece, I'll go over and read Cocteau and think about it. It may inform where I go with the next piece. I think he was also suggesting that we should do what makes us happy, what has real meaning for us, and do it in the most responsible way possible.



**Daniel J. Murphy** is a shareholder in Bernstein Shur's Business Law and Litigation Practice Groups, where his practice concentrates on business and commercial litigation matters.

*Beyond the Law* features conversations with Maine lawyers who pursue unique interests or pastimes. Readers are invited to suggest candidates for *Beyond the Law* by contacting Dan Murphy at [dmurphy@bernsteinsur.com](mailto:dmurphy@bernsteinsur.com).