

BEWABON SHILLING
of light and air

September 12 - October 25

Cover: Bewabon Shilling, *Farm Field*, 2025, Oil on canvas.
Image courtesy of the artist.

of light and air

Before the 19th century and the invention of photography, *en plein air* painting was primarily used as a method for sketching landscapes on location to quickly capture the details of a place. These plein air sketches were then brought back to the artist's studio to inform the composition of a larger painting.

As photography became more commonplace in the 1800s, painters began to consider how the camera's ability to capture a moment so accurately might challenge the status and purpose of their art form. In response, some painters began experimenting with creating finished works solely through the plein air method. Rather than attempting to capture an objective image, as a camera would, artists such as Claude Monet sought to portray how light, colour, and atmosphere are perceived by the human eye. This movement toward plein air painting also aligned with the invention of paint tubes, which made it much easier for artists to travel with their supplies. With this new freedom, Modern artists—such as the French Impressionists, or in Canada, the Group of Seven—began to move further from objective representations of landscapes towards more subjective, expressive and abstract styles. Plein air painting—with its raw immediacy—became one of the key methods used during this period, inspiring a new direction for an old medium.

Plein air painting places the artist at the mercy of the elements. Extended exposure to bright mid-afternoon sunlight, for example, can exhaust the artist's eyes, distorting their perception of colour. That human visual experience can then be transcribed into a painting. Time is also critical to the process. Something that captivates the artist's attention one moment, such as light filtering through trees to caress a forest floor, can instantly disappear under the shadow of a passing cloud. So, decisions need to be made quickly and responsively.

To watch Bewabon Shilling at work is to witness an artist challenging his eye to see clearly, his hand to be sure, and his mind to remain open. Shilling sometimes describes his process as a battle, as he attempts to translate the ever-changing, living spaces before him into paintings that convey not only his visual and physical perceptions but also his intimate connection to the places he paints. For Shilling, the feeling, the flow, the energy, and the rhythms of place are as important as capturing it's appearance.

While Bewabon's approach to plein air painting is partially informed by Modern European painting, his most central influence is the work of his late father, the celebrated Ojibwe artist, Arthur Shilling. Arthur, known for his paintings of family, friends, and members of his community, preferred to work from live models rather than rely on photographs. That unmediated relationship between artist and subject fosters an intimacy that animates both Arthur's and Bewabon's paintings.



Top: Bewabon Shilling, *Painting with Molly and Jeff* (detail), 2025, Oil on canvas.

Image courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Bewabon Shilling paints en plein air in his front yard.

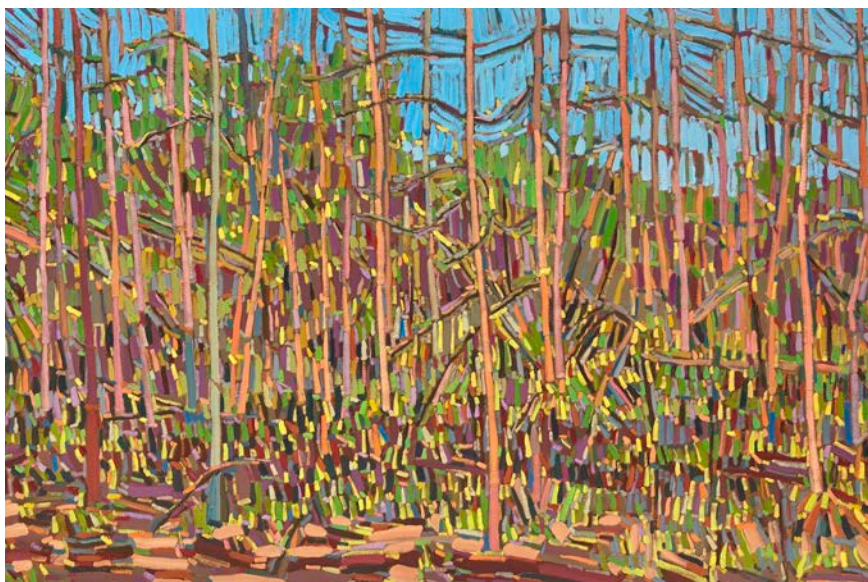




Installation image of Bewabon Shilling's *of light and air*.

Bewabon now lives and works in the home and studio that his father designed and built in Rama First Nation in the mid-seventies, around the time of Bewabon's birth. A combination of traditional Indigenous design and modern architecture, the unique home was where Bewabon first learned to paint and where he first exhibited his work. As the paintings in the exhibition demonstrate, the site and its legacy continue to inspire him.

Of light and air presents two subjects that are touchstones for Bewabon's practice: the woods that surround his home in Rama First Nation, and the nearby wind-swept fields. These two subjects have interested Bewabon for over 20 years, each painting informing the next as Bewabon's style has gradually evolved. His dedication and commitment to finding new inspiration in sites that he experiences daily is what differentiates

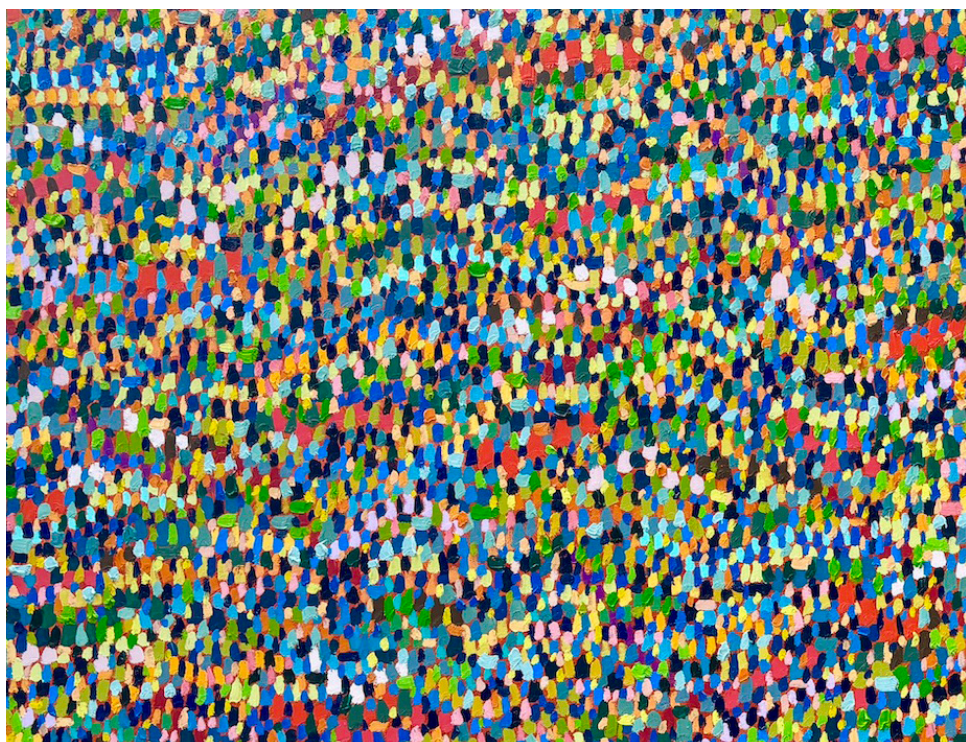


Bewabon Shilling, *Into the Forest, Light and Shadow*, 2022, Oil on canvas.
Image courtesy of the artist.



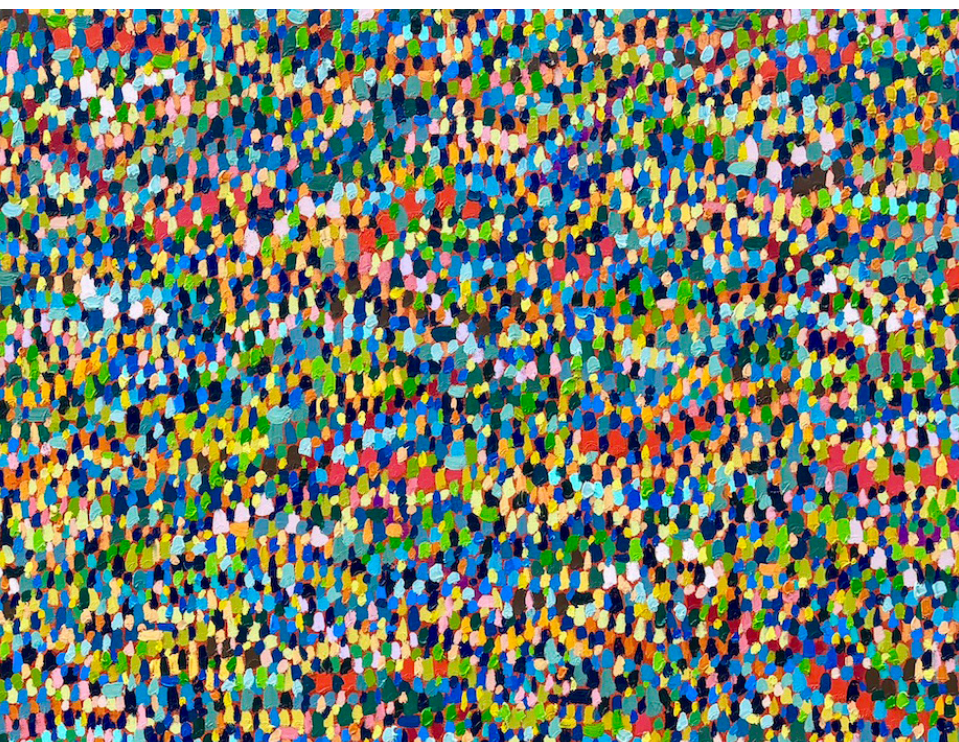
Bewabon Shilling, *Rama/Mara Boundary Line*, 2025, Oil on canvas.
Image courtesy of the artist.

these paintings—each one acting as a model for being attuned to the present moment and honouring the places we call home. The field paintings began when Bewabon encountered a lone tree standing in an otherwise empty field as he was driving home near Rama. The painting that resulted from that encounter was dominated by sky, with the tree and field only taking up a small portion of the bottom of the canvas. In subsequent paintings, Bewabon shifted the horizon up towards the top of the composition to focus more on the fields. More recently, he realized that the paintings could be limited to the fields themselves—eliminating the sky entirely. The resulting works appear as expanses of abstract and rhythmic dots and dashes in a wide range of colours. These fields of colour surround and enfold the viewer in a way that is different from more conventional landscapes.



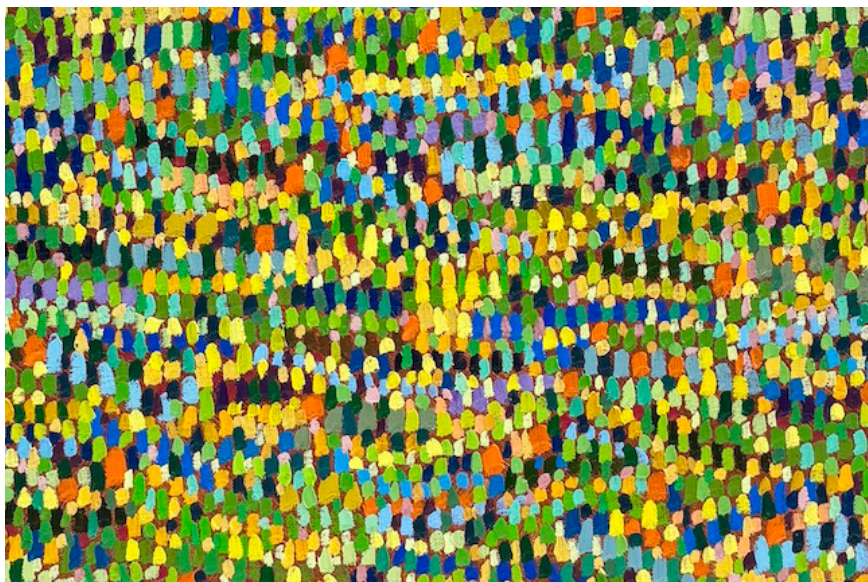
Their resemblance to non-objective abstraction brings the paintings into dialogue with an aspect of modern art in the 20th century that had not previously been central to Bewabon's practice. That interplay between abstraction and representation has led Bewabon to push this development further. It remains important to Bewabon that this new degree of abstraction doesn't sever the vital relationship between these paintings and the places that inspired them.

Bewabon has begun to think about his field paintings as a way of warming up for his forest series. He often shifts between the



Bewabon Shilling, *Field Series*, 2025, Oil on canvas.
Image courtesy of the artist.

two subjects as a way of keeping refreshed and engaged in the studio. The forest paintings in *of light and air* are studies of the changing light on the woods surrounding the Shilling home and studio at different times of day and in different seasons. These woods are just steps away from his front door—visible from his studio windows. As the field paintings have become more abstract in appearance, Bewabon has begun to incorporate similar techniques into his forest paintings. The most recent works are highly active, pulsing with colour and rhythm. Bewabon uses a range of brush sizes and shapes, activating the paintings



Top: Bewabon Shilling, *Green Field Series* (detail), 2024, Oil on canvas.
Image courtesy of the artist.
Bottom: Bewabon Shilling, *Heat Wave*, 2025, Oil on canvas.
Image courtesy of the artist.

with a wide array of brushwork and colour. The results are almost kaleidoscopic—the scenes fractured into distinct shards of colour as Bewabon's eye follows the movement of light and colour across the landscape.

Bewabon's paintings are deeply connected to place and steeped in a rich tradition of artmaking. They bridge Western and Indigenous ways of expressing the significance of landscape. *Of light and air* reflects the depth of Shilling's connection to Rama and the value of finding the extraordinary within the familiar. Each of Shilling's paintings offers a glimpse into a way of being that appreciates the remarkable beauty and ancestral connection to the places—and the artistry—that are integral to his history and identity.

- Jeff Nye



Bewabon Shilling

Bewabon Shilling works in and around the home and studio built by his late father, artist Arthur Shilling. Bewabon graduated from the Ontario College of Art and Design in 2001, where he received both the Norman Jewison Award and the Rose of Cedarvale Scholarship. Shilling has exhibited throughout North America and Europe, and in 2019, he was awarded a Research and Creation Grant from the Canada Council for the Arts. He is represented by the Collectors Gallery of Art in Calgary, AB, and Roberts Gallery in Toronto, ON.

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