

ARTS •

Art Thrives Around the Province

1994's Images & Objects exhibition collects the best of B.C.'s regions

BY PAULA GUSTAFSON

It's unclear which of his small-business, tourism, or culture portfolios the Honourable Bill Barlee was representing—or whom he thought he was addressing—in his speech at the opening of Images & Objects XII, the visual-arts component of the 1994 B.C. Festival of the Arts, held in Campbell River May 25 to 29. Maybe no one told him that the majority of the 195 artists from throughout the province whose work was selected for the exhibition were present in the audience.

After mentioning that he had looked at a few of their works of art, which he thought had "top-rate professional qualities", Barlee launched into a commentary more suited to a Rotary Club luncheon. "You know, the artistic community is rather interesting. To follow their own style, they quite often give up much, and I admire them for it. It affects their quality of life in some respects, but most of them, uh, don't find that too difficult, because they're very interested in their chosen work," Barlee said.

If Barlee doesn't understand that the quality-of-life difficulty most artists have is an income well below the poverty line (although he undoubtedly has a copy of the February 1994 *Report of the B.C. Advisory Committee on the Status of the Artist* citing this province's "blatant disregard for cultural affairs"), he had another problem with comparative numbers a little later in his speech.

Seeming to overlook the fact that festival artists get a nominal travel and accommodation subsidy that allows them to come to the festival, Barlee noted that the 1,200 musicians, actors, writers, dancers, and visual artists gathered in Campbell River "probably bring about three-quarters of a million dollars cash minimum, and that spins out to about \$4 million if you look at the multiplier effect".



Max Chickite's red-cedar, acrylic, horsehair, and rope sculpture, *Bakwus*, depicts the Wild Man of the Woods, a Sasquatch-like figure in Native mythology.

The actual dollars play out somewhat differently. The festival operates on an \$800,000 budget, a grant the B.C. government has not altered since 1982, when the first festival was held in conjunction with the amateur-sports Summer Games in Kamloops. Half of the festival's budget goes to delegate support, which works out to a maximum of about \$300 per artist. For someone travelling from Dawson Creek or Prince Rupert for the five-day festival, that's barely gas money, not spin-off economic multipliers.

The festival's executive director, Gabrielle Levin, notes that, because the grant dollars shrink in real terms each year, artist participation has necessarily decreased by 12 percent, "even though we manage to get generous support from corporate sponsors".

The largest event of its kind in Canada, the B.C. Festival of the Arts involves 60,000 artists at the local level and 10,000 volunteers who help produce more than 75 regional performances and exhibitions. Images & Objects, organized by the Assembly of B.C. Arts Councils, originates with juried exhibitions and two-day visual-arts workshops in 13 regions of the province—all on an unbelievably low budget of just over \$40,000. (The five other provincial organizations that produce regional competitions and coordinate programming for festival events are the Association of B.C. Drama Educators, the Pacific Coast Music Festivals Association, the B.C. Association of Performing Arts Festivals, the B.C. Student Film and Video Festival, and the Federation of B.C. Writers, which invited 20 writers this year to participate in the festival's first literary events.)

Francesca Lund, the assembly's apparently tireless coordinator, who has choreographed the Images & Objects exhibitions for the past six years, doesn't let lack of funding slow down her enthusiasm. She's been known to work every strategy from wheedling charm to outright bullying to ensure "her artists" get recognition as valuable contributors to British Columbia society.

She hates the notion that Images &

Objects, on view at the Campbell River Sportsplex, is an art competition. Insisting that every work of art must be judged on its own merits, Lund has managed to take most of the sting out of the contest format. She says that the Campbell River exhibition is the visible result of a process based on dialogue between the artists who submit their work and the jurors, who bring a wide range of experience and understanding to the exchange. During the

regional shows there are informal feedback sessions, and the five-day festival workshops offer opportunities "to express and explore our feelings as a community of artists, our role in society, and the progress of our work".

Lund also disputes the exhibition's categorization as an amateur-art show or a showcase for "emerging" artists. In fact, she points out, many of the artists are well-known within their regions, and it's obvious from the works on exhibit that most of the artists have professional training.

For the Mattson family of Dawson Creek, Images & Objects has been an integral part of a two-generation success story. Don Mattson, his sister-in-law Emily, and Emily's son, Dean, all had paintings chosen for last year's festival in Trail. They've repeated the achievement this year and added another member of the family, Dean's younger brother, Karl. Exhibitions showing more of their work are scheduled for art galleries in Dawson Creek and Fort St. John, and plans are under way to build a shared studio at their ranch.

Would any of this have happened without Images & Objects? Dean Mattson says probably not. He attended Emily Carr College of Art and Design for a year but returned home when his money ran out. At 23, he's driving truck for a living and painting when he can. Yet his blackly humorous oil pastel of a man eating people off his hatband is one of the most dynamic (and wonderfully cryptic) works in Images & Objects XII.

The rest of the family's talent is equally unique. Karl, 19, shares some of his brother's graphic skills, but his drawings are more evocative. Their

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mother's paintings are unlikely compositions filled with exuberant colour. *Sweetwater Road #3*, Don Mattson's entry, is a straightforward portrait of his grandfather and a longtime neighbour.

Portraiture of another kind was Kitimat artist Lawrence Petter's challenge. He says his *Three Dares*, an oil painting of three remarkably full-figured women, came about for three reasons: "First, the form; second, the nudity; and third, my wife saying that I couldn't do it."

None of these works was a prizewinner in the final judging. Those honours went to four Lower Mainland artists, and to Campbell River's Max Chickite for his carved-cedar transformation figure *Bakwus* (Wild Man of the Woods). Chickite describes the mythical creature, which he also dances in a costume he has made, as having large teeth, long dark hair, and piercing eyes. Like the Sasquatch, it roams the woods, offering "ghost" food to humans.

The four other award winners were Vancouver architect Franklin Allen for his oil painting *Eric and Frank*, North Vancouver's Nancy Lalicon for her 29-piece *Calendars* depicting the female body being represented and manipulated, Royal Columbian Hospital orderly Peter Lojewski for *Spirit Boat*, and Port Coquitlam resident Nerrisa Ng for her multimedia collage *Missing Butterflies*.

Although these five artworks, 10 honourable-mention winners, and another 17 selections from the exhibition will be shown again in Victoria during the Commonwealth Games, none of the works is destined for permanent display—which raises another question about this province's cultural policies. According to Francesca Lund, it's been more than five years since any of the festival's award-winning images or objects were acquired for the province's art collection. Surely Bill Barlee and his colleagues could come up with a few thousand dollars annually to purchase some of the best of British Columbia art. ■

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