

Poulin and the business of art

When he moved to Sudbury four and a half years ago, he was told by outsiders that he would starve. But Bernie Poulin has been hanging around ever since, and couldn't be happier about his adopted home.

Bernie Poulin is one of Sudbury's most successful and widely sold artists. His versatility has enabled him to not only achieve success in his profession but also in a city that is just beginning to appreciate art in a big way.

But versatility and talent are not the only qualifications necessary to become a successful artist, whether it be in Sudbury or elsewhere.

"An artist makes it in Sudbury the same as he makes it anywhere," says Bernie. "Art is a business. The link between business and art has deteriorated over the years. But now we are coming back to the idea that fine art fits in well with not only advertising but business in general. An artist can paint in any style, but there are three things to consider if you want to be successful: 1) only the best of your work is offered to the public (you junk the rest), 2) you must have enormous respect for your clients, 3) if you are not a good businessman, you'd better find one who is."

Business techniques don't often come easy to an artist, Bernie admits. But in order to make a living at the sale of his work, it was necessary to learn the art of selling, promotion, public relations and basic office procedure.

It has also been necessary for him to engage two agents, one of whom is located in Colorado and services the United States market. He has also found the need to hire an accountant and bookkeeper. And he admits, having a wife with "terrific business sense" sometimes pulls the whole thing together.

Although Bernie was successful in Ottawa prior to coming to Sudbury, there are several reasons why his name has continued undaunted since his arrival. The first is his work. His easily recognizable pencil drawings of children have found their way into Sudbury's heart via book covers, posters, and reproductions sold in local shops.

Over the past two years there has been an increase in commercial work and the number of portraits commissioned. The new Sudbury centennial calendar features 16 of his drawings relating to the city's history and his collection of Mig cartoons in book form is available throughout the city.

Bernie's work will be on display at Gallerie Gauthier from Nov. 26 to Dec. 16. The show will feature about 50 works of



Artist Bernie Poulin at work

art, half of which will be offered to the public for sale. The remaining half are works which were commissioned and are for display purposes only.

Bernie began painting 23 years ago. At the age of 14, he decided to attend a private school, which he had to finance himself.

"I didn't know much about business at 14 - but my father did. He just told me flatly that the paintings under the couch, under the bed, behind the chairs, under the counter and everywhere else had to go. So it was either they went out in the garbage or I went out and peddled them."

And peddle them he did. He finally found a store in his hometown of Windsor, Famous Furniture, whose owner was willing to remove the store's cheap reproductions from their frames and hang Bernie's work instead.

"I got, maybe, \$25 for each painting and he may have sold them for \$200 each. But we had a mutual agreement and I was satisfied."

Bernie Poulin put himself through teacher's college by utilizing his talents, and for 16 years was employed as a special education teacher for emotionally disturbed children in psychiatric treatment centres. From this period, he admits, comes the insight into children, which is



... Bernie Poulin

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readily identifiable in about 80 per cent of his work.

"We usually relate kids to smiles and tears. That's about all the emotions we relate to kids. Well, kids feel hate, envy, anger and happiness. They talk, not only with their mouths but with their eyes and body movements."

The final, and perhaps most important reason, for Bernie's success is his love for Sudbury. Sudbury is not so much the smoke stack, says Bernie. Sudbury is blueberries... and birch trees. The smoke stack is only a part of the Sudbury area. And Sudbury is a unique kind of people.

"Art is alive in Sudbury. Theatre is alive. People are really gung-ho in this city and that's the reason why I enjoy being here. It's a gutsy place - where people try

things nobody else would ever dare. And they succeed at it. And when they don't they try another idea. But they don't accept failure. Sure, it's a rough place to live in because of the ups and downs in the economy. But to me, Sudbury represents 'tomorrow'. If there's going to be any growth in Ontario, it's going to be in the north. Anything happening in the future is going to happen in Sudbury."

Bernie knows his market. His work, he says, is not suitable to hang in museums. But that has never bothered him. In fact, he never really wanted to hang in a museum.

"I always wanted to hang in someone's livingroom. A lot of average everyday people see it hanging in a home. And I guess I relate to the average everyday people. I don't paint in any particular style. I paint emotion."