

The Entertainers

Bernie Poulin: full-time

artist

By Carolyn Fouriezos

To understand artist Bernard Aime Poulin and his art, observe his creation, "Mig", the wise cartoon-child who appears in Northern Life. Mig complains "Year of the Child? Big deal, even though you're first, they still serve you last." Bernie Poulin relates to Mig's complaint and indeed to all the authentic children's remarks he compiles and uses as captions for the strip.

Poulin himself is slight, boyish and intense. His dark eyes glint behind tinted glasses. Only his thick, black moustache belies the innocence and enthusiasms of childhood which are strongly reflected in his work.

The work is expert, professional and, in the

studies of children in particular, strongly emphatic. Perhaps this is because Bernie worked with children for most of his adult life. He based the character, Mig, on a child, Miguel, who was labelled mentally disturbed because he was "too happy." Bernie reflects, "I trust kids more than adults - they are so honest and direct. They will look you in the face when many adults turn away." Bernie paints "kids as people, not as children," because he hates categories. He also observes that "adult society adores babies, endures children, fears adolescents and hates itself".

Not that Bernie is a cynic. He would, however, like to promote a better understanding between children and

adults. He is currently at work on a children's book. Bernie does commissioned portraits of children, but admits that these are expensive because he takes the time to get to know his subjects. He refuses to paint them in an artificially contrived manner.

His children's portraits are arresting. There is a miniature of a boy, reminiscent of a Dickens' character, whose pensive features are framed by a thatch of blonde hair. Another, in conte, of his nine-year old daughter, Elaine, captures the wistful look of budding girlhood. A pen and ink drawing entitled "The Runaway", shows a boy with a satchel, tacky suitcase and old hat, slouched on a bench in an undefined landscape, waiting for the ride that will lead him to his dream. It could well be a portrait of the 15-year-old artist, who ran away from his home in Windsor to work in a store, in Ottawa. Poulin's employer then persuaded him to attend Teacher's College. Teaching led to his special area - work with disturbed children. He became director of the boy's department for the Mentally Disturbed in Ottawa, continued to teach these children and to set up similar departments for other School Boards. He also served as a single foster-parent to 14 boys. He taught special education classes at Ottawa University and currently conducts courses at Laurentian.

When he moved to Sudbury with his charming wife, Marie-Paul, a CBC executive, and their two children (he has



"Do Re Mi," bare-bottomed on a piano stool, available at art outlets in Sudbury area

another daughter, 16-month-old Valerie), Bernie decided to become that rarity, the full-time professional artist. For, although he has taken no formal art classes (except for one from which he was expelled at the age of 8), he has continued to paint and exhibit his work since 1967. You won't find much of his original art hanging on the walls of his lovely home. This is because his patrons often snap up his work before it leaves the easel. His paintings hang in galleries not only on this continent, but also in private European collections.

Bernie's art is not confined to children and portraiture. He is an eclectic artist who prefers high realism "because it is more controlled than abstract." He renders his landscapes, still-lives and portraits in a variety of media. His pen and ink line drawings of nudes are simple, stylized and evocative. In one still-life oil, three miniaturized eggs gleam white and palpable on a dark background. Bernie likes earth tones in oils

and "the sense of light coming out of the dark." His watercolours, by contrast, are bright and lively.

Bernie explains that "there are several ways to survive as an artist. The modern way is the limited edition reproductions that make the bread and butter money, so that I can continue to grow and develop." He has formed his own marketing company for his prints, signed, numbered, and sold worldwide. His company is called "Classic Perceptions Classique". Bernie also designs logos and mastheads for organizations. His favourite charity, Big Brothers, bears one of his illustrations of children. He is also a gifted photographer. Thus, Bernie can afford to live well, independent of government grants and completely unlike the penniless, threadbare artist of old.

Bernie loves Sudbury. He believes not only in its landscape, which he considers inspiring, but also in its indigenous artists, whom he thinks equal or better their counterparts in larger



Bernie Poulin

centres. Bernie works in his light, very tidy studio accompanied by the sounds of classical music and choral groups. His limited edition print "Do Re Mi", is a study of his daughter, seated, bare-bottomed, on a piano stool. The glowing flesh tones contrast with the darkwood of the piano. A small grey kitten inquisitively observes his mis-

trepreneur. "Do Re Mi" may be now purchased at art outlets in Sudbury. To see more of the artist's work, however, the Museum and Arts Centre will host an exhibition of Poulin's art in November. For inquiries about portraits or, for a look at the artist's existing work, call 566-0646 for an appointment.