

PEEL BIOGRAPHY: BENNER, Tom

ARTS & ENT

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At the Art Gallery of Mississauga

Tom Benner's art inspired by real life

By SANDY MCLEAN
Special

Tom Benner is an artist who talks to his audience through striking, poignant sculpture, using watercolor and linocut on paper.

He is a story teller.

Weaving together his tales of native and natural history, Benner's art captivates the imagination, evokes a sense of loss and inspires change.

"I first noticed Tom's work in a catalogue distributed by the Art Gallery Of Toronto. I was struck by the playfulness of his works and the irony of them," Art Gallery Of Mississauga curator Stuart Reid told a gathering last Thursday night at Tom Benner's opening.

From London, Ontario, Benner's *Recent Works* exhibit, that continues until Dec. 9, dips into the myths and legends of Canadian culture and brings them to light.

"They are very poetic," said Reid of the sculptures and their juxtaposition to watercolors and linocut prints.

"It's an ongoing commitment to a feeling toward nature and what makes us tick. The fact that we are part of the planet," Benner said.

He began working on *Hanging Fin (Whale)* in the early 1980s, following a trip to the library — his second favorite place after his studio — that left him feeling there was a lack of animal symbolism in Western culture.

"Our culture seemed to be devoid of that," he said. "So, as an artist, I thought it was my job to try and put that in."

Again at the library, Benner came across the story of a fin whale harpooned for her milk by a Norwegian whaling ship in 1961. Her offspring died.

This inspired Benner's depiction of a cold rolled metal and hardware infant whale, hanging by thick rope that is wrapped tightly around its tail fin.

Another work re-creates in molded fibreglass the great auks, that once numbered in the millions before man recklessly slaughtered them into extinction.

Tecumseh was created in memory of Tecumseh's travels throughout North America, his quest to unite the Native population in the late 1700s and the dynamic created when different cultures met.

The brief story of Tecumseh is hand written in pencil on the watercolor and linocut pieces that hang beyond the wooden beavers and copper canoe.



An inside look at the great outdoors...Artist Tom Benner, who focusses his artwork on animals and Canadian culture, poses with one of the displays that can be seen at the gallery. The exhibit entitled, *Tom Benner: Recent Works*, will run at the Art Gallery of Mississauga, 300 City Centre Dr. until Dec. 9.

Despite the tragedy behind some of his works, Benner, who began his career in 1970 after graduating from his high school art program, said he is a positive person and his art is definitely not a pessimistic view of the world.

His work has been featured in solo exhibitions at the University Of Western Ontario, the Art Gallery Of Hamilton, the Art Gallery Of Ontario and the McDonald Stewart Art Centre in Guelph.

In 1992, his work was shown at the World Exposition in Seville, Spain, and his pieces are included in the collections of the Canada Council Art Bank, the Ontario Arts Council, the Art Gallery Of Ontario and the London Regional Art

Gallery. Benner will be giving a free public lecture on his work at the Art Gallery Of Mississauga, Thursday, Nov. 17 at 7 p.m.