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Hubert Sabelis — artist and



Hubert Sabelis says that he couldn't live without art. It makes him get up from watching television and go downstairs to his basement and paint. Those paintings end up in exhibitions as far away as Tokyo. (Mississauga News photo by Fred Loek)

'I couldn't live without art'

By BOB BERGEN

Art. What is it?

To some it's a painting hanging on a wall which adds color to a room.

To others it's a souvenir of Canada one can buy in tourist shops in Niagara Falls. Turn it upside down and the label will read "Made in Japan."

To Hubert Sabelis, it's the thing that won't let him watch television when he returns home from work at the Royal Ontario Museum.

It's the thing which forces him to go downstairs to the basement in his Mississauga home and drape his emotions over canvases for the whole world to see.

It's the thing which compelled him to put the word "symphony" over the garage at his Lundene Road home.

The word doesn't mean anything to

passersby, but they don't know that Hubert's mother had that same word over the door of their Netherland's home where Hubert was born.

When she came to Canada to visit she somehow knew that Hubert would have it hanging over his door too. His mother used to be an opera singer in her youth. She wasn't disappointed.

He's had exhibitions of his work shown in London, Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa, Galt, Aberfoyle and Brantford. Another exhibition will be opening in Tokyo in August and another at the Oakville Public Library, also in August.

His paintings hang in both private and public collections in the Royal Ontario Museum, in the United States, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Iceland, and Mexico.

The Oakville show is entitled, "Homage to Canada and its Immigrants."

"Being a foreigner I think I'm more fanatic about being in Canada than the people who were born here," he says.

Hubert, who received his landed immigrant status long ago says, "The immigrant and it means a lot to them."

In his show "Homage to Canada and its Immigrants" he wanted to show people moving from one country to another. Instead of showing the obvious he wanted to show what was going on inside the immigrant rather than depicting people on airplanes.

"I wanted to show the psychological things," he said.

To do that, he's taken his own personal experiences and used them as

examples. His personal experiences, it must be added, haven't always been that good. There was a time he lived in London, just new to Canada, when he humbly admits he was "very poor."

All his works are acrylic on canvas and all have a big orange sun in the background.

"The sun is the centre of all energy for all life," he says. "It's all very symbolic."

The abundance of open space in his paintings suggests the new country (Canada) and the plentiful greens suggest the fertility of the new land.

The figures in this series of paintings are all naked and Hubert says this indicates that the new immigrants who come to Canada start with nothing and they begin a completely new life.

See HUBERT page N-2.

Huibert learned a lot about colors from Quebec's artists

(continued from page N-1)

His art is highly stylized because Huibert's life is devoted to the natural world and he maintains that nature is the teacher of stylization.

The people are all stylized, animals, plants and even the mythological figures he uses in some paintings are stylized.

The presence of a trillium in one painting, then, could take one by surprise because it is the only really accurate portrayal in works which are highly abstract. Huibert says that's really no surprise because after all as he pointed out nature is the teacher of stylization.

"It's the stylization which comes closest to reality," he says.

"The Eskimos knew it and primitive artists like the cavemen knew it," he explained. "They caught it."

"People don't look at things around them as artists do," he says.

"I've always been close to nature," he went on.

"As a kid I played in the jungle and when I was older I played in the woods. I've always been by myself and I've always appreciated the things around me."

"You always put the things you recollect into a painting but you don't always recollect where it comes from," he said.

Huibert wants his paintings to give relaxing peaceful feelings because he says they lend their moods to the house they're in.

He uses bright colors in his paintings but they're never overpowering.

When he does a painting it's what he feels, even though the subject is often painful. "If I'm in a real bad mood I can't paint," he says.

"Paintings to me are a piece of my mind, they're a piece of my life."

He was born in Holland in 1942 but spent most of youth with his parents in Indonesia and returned to Holland when he was 13.

He studied art in Holland but when he entered the army he had to drop painting because there simply was no longer time for it.

"I did learn ceramics," he said. "That was the soldiers' only recreation."

"I didn't get along very well in the army," he said. "I clashed a lot because I sided with Indonesia at a time when Indonesia and Holland didn't get along very well."

He didn't bother going back to school when he got out of the army, but worked as a donut maker and a cook.

He did that for one month and then one day walked into the Canadian Embassy and another month later was in Canada.

He landed a job at a yacht club as a waiter which kept him alive for a while. He found that the only thing he really couldn't get used to in Canada was the winter — which doesn't really make him different from a lot of natives who say they'll never get used to it.

After many changes of location he ended up in London, Ontario working for the University of Western Ontario on their mollusk collection and in a paint factory.

"I made paint from the bottom up, but at least it gave me the chance to start doing something again," he said, "even if it was only painting walls. Art came back into my head."

"I started back in doing mostly India ink drawings because I couldn't afford anything else," he said.

His India ink drawings were mostly of Indonesian scenes and Eskimos art themes.

A friend advised him to start painting on canvas and to start using acrylics. "It was something new," he said. "I started to develop again."

He became heavily influenced by Asiatic and Eskimo art because their stylization really appealed to him.

His early paintings only indicated to him that he didn't know enough about color so he started experimenting.

"I lived in my own little world. I wasn't really paying attention to other artists anymore," he said.

His style began to venture into automatism, non-objective art, but found his paintings then became monotonous because all he could get were different color schemes.

One day he saw an exhibition of Canadian painters and had the feeling that some of the paintings he saw were much the same as his own. They were by Jean-Paul Riopelle and Paul-Emile Borduas, two artists from Quebec.

"I learned a lot about colors from them and I found that when I returned to stylization I was combining it with automatism," he said.

"What I do now is very similar to what I was doing in the beginning."

"I did a series of paintings on the Philippines," he says, "because I'm still very intrigued by the Asiatic peoples."

His wife, Evangeline, is from the Philippines.

One day in London, while he was still very poor a man in a large black limousine drove up to Huibert's home, asked to see his paintings. As easily as anyone else would pick grapes, he pointed to paintings and said, "I'll take that one, and that one, and that one and that one," which sort of stunned Huibert because he'd never had that much money before.

The first thing he bought was a guitar and then food. Music still influenced his life then as it does now — a hangover from his childhood.

He used to play in a rock and roll band in Holland in his youth.

He still plays with a little encouragement and best likes the rock and roll songs of Johnny Rivers and Country and Western artists. It's the energy element and the emotional involvement which make music appealing to him.

It's really the same simple appeal which exists in his paintings. The emotions are on display. It would do no justice to the paintings to describe them with words — they need to be seen.

Huibert is also somewhat of a poet. Although he's never been published the subject matter of his poetry is much the same as his paintings. The subject is feelings and he's to be admired for the courage it takes to write down that which most people guard.

"I believe in every artist is the goal to reach perfection," he says, "but you won't reach it while you live."

"The most perfect piece is the one you've done last."

"I couldn't live without art."

ARKERS

N1

COLLECTOR OF ROCKS Returns from Yellowknife with eight tons of fossils

By BOB BERGEN

Not quite part of a Jekyll and Hyde act but close to it, a Mississauga man leads one of the most diversified lives most people have ever encountered.

Hubert Sabelis has just returned from Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories with 16,049 pounds of rocks.

But they're not ordinary rocks, they're fossils and they're 1.85 billion years old. They will be part of a specimen display in the invertebrate paleontology department at the Royal Ontario where Hubert works as a technician.

The Jekyll and Hyde part enters the scene when you realize that he works at the museum so he can afford his true love in life — painting, but that's another story in itself.

His job at the museum required that he be part of a three-man dig for fossil specimens of stromatolites, fossils of algae 1.85 billion years old.

To do that he, Dr. Desmond Collins and Bob Barnett the gallery co-ordinator, flew 115 miles east of Yellowknife by bushplane and set down on a tiny lake perched on the top of a cliff 200 feet above the surface of McCleod Bay on Great Slave Lake.

SUPPLIES

They took with them supplies for two weeks, tents, sleeping bags, 10-gallon drums of gas, portable chain saws and a 130-pound canoe to get them to their various site locations.

From the start they were plagued by mosquitos that probably had never seen human beings in their lives — and bit like they'd never eaten before.

They discovered the 200-foot cliff they'd planned to climb down was a sheer drop and they had to radio in an airplane to transport them those 200 feet.

One day while paddling their canoe along the sheer face of the cliff, a storm came up and nearly sent them to the bottom of the bay.

By necessity they had to transport everything in the canoe which was so loaded down there was only two inches clearance from the top of the gunwale to the water's surface.

Only 15 minutes after the storm started their canoe had taken in three inches of water and they had to bail for their lives.

They couldn't even beach the boat because of the sheer face of the cliff, but they managed to stay afloat by sheer determination to live.

SPECIMENS

Altogether they stayed two weeks gathering the specimens, "a quick run in and out" as they say jokingly in the geological business, they came away with some spectacular samples.

The trip had been in the planning stages since late 1973 and it will take nearly two more years of work on the fossils — cleaning and polishing them before they're ready for display, but that's all part of Hubert's work.

He's been working on this display for two and a half years. It will finally measure four feet by five feet in the Museum and will be like looking at a chapter of a book representing 150 years of history only the book itself will be 1.85 billion years old.

Just to give a perspective, man himself is just over two million years old, that means a factor of about 1,000 times over.

The fossils are those of algae which form in salt water. They're the simplest form of life with only one cell. Gradually particles of sand become embedded in the algae and new algae form over the top of that — resulting in a layered effect.

EDUCATION

"Setting up a display is really a matter of educating the average person who comes into the museum," says Hubert.

"The displays may be beautiful but to the average person they're just rocks with holes in them," he said. While they have to make the displays visually pleasing they are also faced with having to keep a sense of scientific validity.

They have to make the displays easy enough to understand so that any Grade 6 student could understand it and so any parent could explain it to his child.

"Much time is spent debating the correct positioning for the display. Some of the displays are four and five years in the making," he explained.



"Actually the whole purpose of the museum is to document Ontario," said Hubert.

"I have rocks I collected in Erin Mills that are four and a half million years old," he said.

"People are swearing at these rocks in their backyard when, if they had any appreciation of them, they would be putting them on the mantel in their living room," he said.

STUNNING NEWS

Then he brought out the stunning news that Mississauga was once at the bottom of a salt water ocean.

"Within the last 17,000 years since the glaciers left the difference in the ocean level is about 300 metres," he said.

"Yes, Mississauga was once under salt water with coral reefs like in the Bahamas in people's backyards," he went on.

"These oceans come and go," he quipped. The oceans actually "come and go" over the course of millions of years.

How does one become that involved with fossils in the first place?

Hubert says simply enough that he was always interested in mollusks. Next question — what are mollusks?

"They're seashells which you could pick up along any beach," he said. "When I lived in London, Ontario, I worked for the University of Western Ontario in the department of zoology," he explained. "I worked on the mollusk collection there."

His jobs have changed constantly but he's been settled at the Royal Ontario Museum since 1968 and he says of his job, "There's not much chance to get bored. The trips break the monotony."