

Painting humor is John Der's gift

The funny or comical side of life, yet always real, is the stuff of John Der's paintings. No doubt this stems from Mr. Der's uncommon route through life which began in Canora, Saskatchewan where he was born in 1926.

He took a liking to ships and the sea early on, joining the Merchant Marine at the age of 15 and travelling the world. In 1946, he became a cartoonist for a union newspaper. Married at the age of 21, he became a father two years later.

From 1949 to 1952, John Der studied at the School of Art and Design of the Montreal School of Fine Arts under Arthur Lismer, Marian Scott and Jacques de Tonnancour. He worked for the Mountain Playhouse as a cartoonist and drew a cartoon strip in Radio-Monde: Willie Lamothe, Jean Pitou and Jean Brillant.

In 1952, family obligations became more pressing and Mr Der became an insurance broker and agent, an occupation he held until 1982. The family grew with the birth of two more children.

During a holiday in Florida, he decided to leave the insurance business and to devote himself exclusively to painting. A first exhibition as a professional was held in Montreal in 1983. Since then he has been represented by Denis Beauchamp and Multi Art.

During an interview in his Rosemère home, I saw in Mr. Der a very warm person whose paintings depict human physique in casual and sometimes hilarious pose, always with a sharp sense of humor. 'Life is often sad; I like to bring out the humorous side.' noted the painter.

Mr. Der's characters are always oversize and that has become his trademark. He himself is anything but small and lean.

He paints mostly on masonite, which is unusual. He does this to obtain a pastel effect by rubbing his brush against the masonite which has a liquid latex coating applied over the gesso.

He does his paintings from rough sketches on a small pad. Children are one of his favourite subjects, often in groups playing sports (baseball, hockey, soccer). He depicts them as loveable and tender. And avid sportsman, he is very fond of skiing. With the Laurentians just a hop from home, he takes advantages of the proximity and has drawn inspiration from this sport for some of his paintings.

In his studio (located in his home) Mr. Der puts a temporary frame on each painting to see what the work will look like once the permanent frame is put in place.

The artist owns a home in Florida where he spends a month each winter. For many years, he owned a 35 ft sailboat but sold it after growing tired of sailing in Lake Champlain in summer and Florida in winter.

John Der is a real person and a happy one at that. 'I feel a freedom by painting' he says. 'I've always wanted to live like this'

His works are sold in several galleries across Canada and in Martinique and he has many solo exhibits to his credit. French President François Mitterrand bought one of Mr. Der's paintings, as have many corporations' banks and museums.

A vernissage of his works will be held on May 2nd at the Balcon d'art on Notre Dame Street.

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