

ARTS

Artist set to head out on 'Arctic Quest'

By Stephanie Thiessen
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Standing surrounded by the cold, rugged beauty of the Arctic, artist Brigitte Schreyer struggled to capture what was before her with a paintbrush.

Never had she felt as small as she did at that moment; the vast landscape — mostly ice-covered ocean and frozen, barren land — seemed to stretch forever.

"It's like I was this little needle in a haystack," explained Schreyer, a Milton-area oil and watercolour artist. "It's a rough beauty, that's what it is."

It was on that trip that Schreyer made a promise to herself. No more than 12 months would pass before she returned.

But then life happened. That year stretched into five, 10, and then 15. Most of her paintings from that trip were long sold.

Now, 17 years later, Schreyer is finally about to make good on her promise.

Relaxing at her Lowville home — which was built and lived in by famed wildlife artist Robert Bateman — Schreyer explained her upcoming adventure. On July 22, she'll once again travel to the Arctic, taking part with 24 other artists in a monumental project called the Arctic Quest.

During a 12-day voyage aboard a 6,450-tonne ship, the group will visit remote communities to record their impressions on canvas, paper and film, as well as distribute art supplies to stimulate artistic expression in Inuit youth.

Schreyer, a co-founder of the Fine Arts Society of Milton, said she'll do simple watercolour paintings of what she sees and take lots of photos. When she returns home, she'll use the paintings and photos to paint larger, more polished pieces.

"I'm going to close the door behind my studio and not come out for months," she said.

The voyage will celebrate the 100th anniversary of explorer Roald Amundsen's first successful navigation through the Northwest Passage.

"It took him three years (to complete). It'll take us 10 days," she said, adding, "Everyone before him perished. We're celebrating his accomplishment."

The artists will voyage through Frobisher Bay to Baffin Island and then to Greenland, stopping at various ports

and communities via zodiac boats.

The group will have to be ready for anything, Schreyer said, and that includes the possibility of meeting up with polar bears. With their team at all times will be a 'gun bearer'.

When the artists return, the resulting artwork will make up numerous exhibits — venues have already been confirmed in Vancouver, Toronto and the United States — and the group will participate in a number of exhibitions, workshops and lectures. These will coincide with International Polar Year, taking place from 2007 to 2009.

Standing in her home studio in front of a large painting of Auyutuq Park on Baffin Island, Schreyer explained that the Arctic and the prairies hold a similar fascination for her. "(They're) vast landscapes that go on forever," she said.

The Arctic Quest project was partly conceived by Toronto artist Linda Mackey, and launched in January of 2005. The opportunity was presented to Schreyer last year.

It didn't take long for Schreyer, an oil painter and watercolour artist, to decide this was the opportunity of a lifetime.

There are several goals of the trip, besides the obvious. The journey is intended to draw attention to northern issues such as climate change and the fragile environment.

The group also hopes to bring about the restoration of a historical building in Pangnirtung, Nunavut for use by local and visiting artists.

Mark's Work Wearhouse generously agreed to sponsor Schreyer for the trip, covering all her costs and outfitting her, as well as providing jackets for the rest of the team.

Born and raised in Germany, Schreyer immigrated to Winnipeg in 1960 and moved to Mississauga in 1972. Always having a passion for the fine arts — her father was a landscape painter — Schreyer began painting seriously in 1972 and started teaching in 1978.

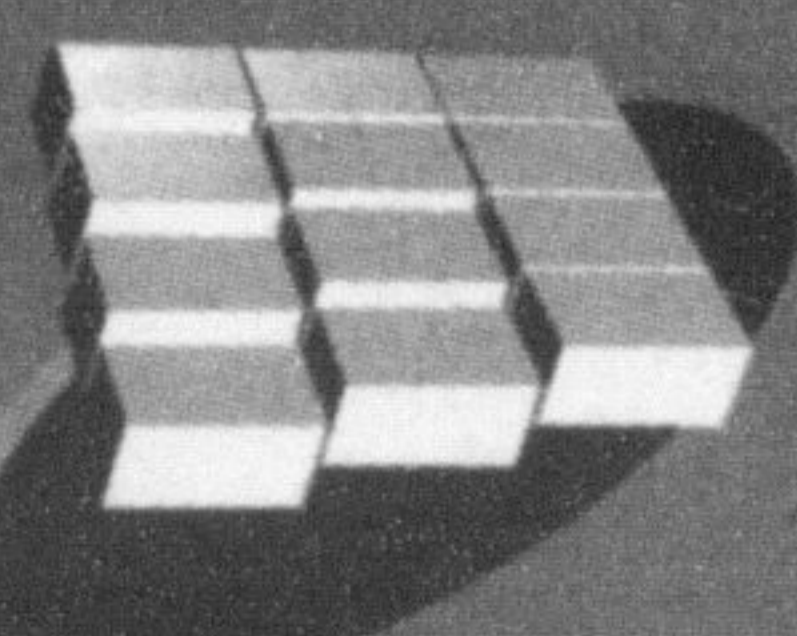
Schreyer said she's looking forward to being with so many established artists, because they can all learn from each other. She's not nervous about the trip, only excited. "It's a new experience and I'm still young enough to do it one more time," Schreyer said, adding, "I should've done it a long time ago."

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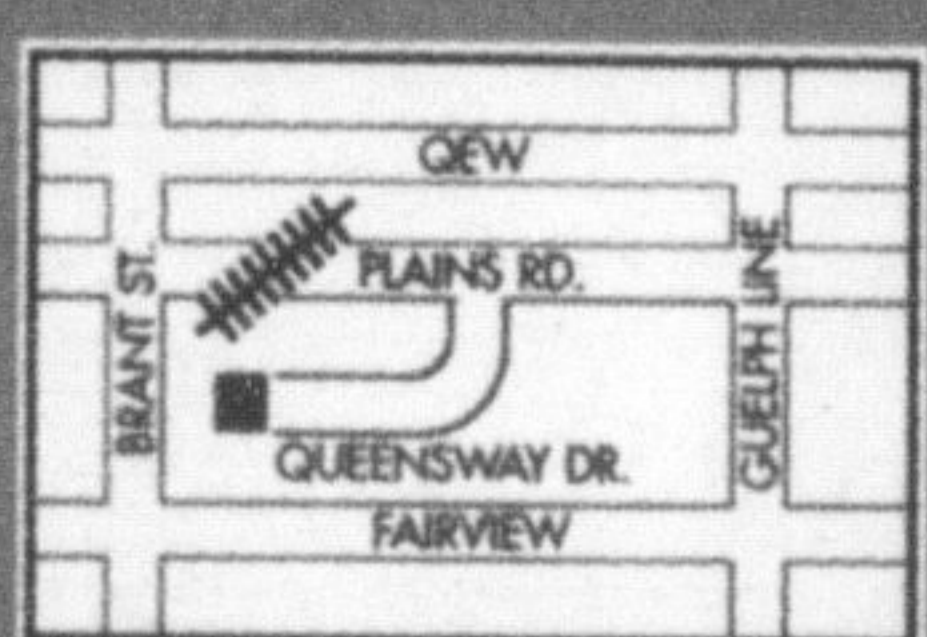
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GREAT WHITE NORTH CALLING: Eagerly awaiting her Arctic sojourn, artist Brigitte Schreyer displays one of her Arctic paintings — entitled 'View from Mt. Duval'.



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