

Artist operates gallery-studio

Shelley Niro features both native and non-native work

By Sheila M. Ferguson, For The Expositor

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Brantford artist Shelley Niro is doing something she has long wanted to do; she is operating an art gallery which also houses her studio. In May of this year, the Niroquois Gallery opened at 318½ Colborne Street in downtown Brantford. Its second exhibition is just now winding down.

The first exhibition mounted in the new space featured sculpture work by Niro and the artwork of four other area artists. The most recent exhibition, "Contemplations," included 23 works by fourteen artists. There were watercolors, collages, sculptures, graphic work, paintings, photographs and drawings. When the exhibition is dismantled this month, Niro will start work, with fellow artist Chelo Sebastian, on the next show which is slated for viewing in late November. This upcoming show will feature works by ten artists.

The Niroquois Gallery will not be closed between now and then, however. When Niro is not in Toronto, where she is in her fourth year at the Ontario College of Art, she can be found at the gallery most afternoons throughout the week. The unique name for her gallery comes from a marriage of Niro's surname and her Iroquois heritage. She was raised on the Six Nations Reserve.

"Although I am native, my gallery does not hang only native art," she explained.

"There are many artists in the Brantford area, and from the surrounding region who are doing quality work and who exhibit here," Niro added.

For example, Patricia Deadman is from Woodstock, J.C. Elvey is from Kitchener, and Annerie Van Gernerden is a Hamilton artist, to name a few artists associated with the Niroquois Gallery.

"I wanted to provide a space where serious artists could display their work," said Niro. "When your own work is on display in a gallery, you cannot help but gain from that experience - get educated by it. You don't know what to expect from the viewing public. Exhibiting your art can be an exercise in humiliation or in exhilaration."

There are public galleries in many communities with display space for artists' work. Many of these are relatively large organizations with governing bodies, such as a board of directors, and it is not always easy for an artist to mount an exhibition at such a gallery, especially if the volume of work he or she has produced is not large.

Then there is the jury system for special art events. This system requires that an artist's work be in competition with pieces by other artists. Based on the selections made by members of the jury, artists may miss these occasions to exhibit their work.

"Artists who are serious about their work, but who may not have a large body of completed work to draw from, can use

the Niroquois Gallery," said Niro. "This is a gallery setting and the artists are making use of it. They may not profit from it monetarily, but they can benefit from it in other ways. To see their piece beside the work of other artists can help an artist more accurately visualize a future project in its completed form. Collective displays are better than displaying a work in isolation," explained Niro.

She is happy with the location of the gallery. "We get a lot of viewers who are curious to see what we are all about. I started to display an artwork or two in the front window and that drew people's attention. They wander in to see the other work," Niro said. Not all art galleries have the luxury or advantage of 'store-front' display space.

"Visitors are really surprised to find out how many 'local' artists there are," continued Niro. "These artists have pride in their communities, as I do in Brantford and here they can contribute to the community's environment and help make it that much more interesting."

At the gallery Niro works on her bronze sculptures, or is involved in the necessary day-to-day operation and promotion of the space. She is sometimes assisted by one or more of her artist-colleagues. If you drop by to see what is on display you have a very good chance of meeting and speaking with one or more of these artists. For hours of operation call the Niroquois Gallery at 756-2205.

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