

ARTS & CULTURE

NEW GENERATION OF YUKON CARVERS



1. William Callaghan with mask in progress; 2. Arnold Elias with Eagle Mask; 3. Josh Skookum with his already sold Crow Mask with horsehair; 4. Derrick Hastings with two mushrooms; 5. Katie English and her baby, Autumn, with Eagle Mask in progress; 6. William Skookum (aka Willz) with his first mask, in progress, and paddle in progress; 7. Justin Skookum, with finished Eagle Mask, already sold.



From the ARTS with Nicole Bauberger

Arts Underground will host a show of beautiful carvings by emerging Yukon artists.

William Callaghan, Arnold Elias, Josh Skookum, Terrance Clark, Derrick Hastings, Katie English, William Skookum (aka Willz) and Justin Skookum are taking part in the Carving Business Program funded by Services Canada (recently known as the H.R.S.D.C.) and managed by Heather and Andrew Finton at Sundog Retreat. The artists range in age from 16 to 30 years.

The program runs 41 weeks from Sept. 26, 2005 to July 15, 2006. Eight of those weeks are spent in five-day, intensive, instructed carving sessions at the Sundog Retreat.

The day I visited the retreat, the snow had just stopped. The Sundog Retreat hosts annual general meetings and strategic plan-

ning sessions for many NGOs. Construction is underway to make a new meeting room and sauna, to add to the luxury of the hot tub outside.

Heather Finton observed that you could see the mountains for the first time in a couple of days. The feeling of being in a high, wide-open space impressed me. It seemed like a good place to envision a career in art.

In the carving studio, seven young artists were hard at work. Wood chips speckled the concrete floor. Some were carving, some painting their carvings, holding their breath to get the line exactly right.

Heather Finton told me the artists work 9 to 5, breaking for supper and returning to the studio to work from 7 to 9 p.m., though many of them worked through till 11.

I didn't ask when any of them

had time to use the hot tub.

In the studio, carving instructor Calvin Morberg works with each artist and their individual carving. They stop for the occasional group presentation.

The day before, Morberg taught how to inlay abalone shell in a carving. When I visited, one carver was practising cutting holes in a scrap piece of wood, to master the technique before proceeding with the rest of the inlay in his paddle.

Marlene Collins curates the Yukon Art Society gallery in Arts Underground. She drove me up the North Klondike Highway to the retreat. Collins researched Kaska traditional art for an exhibition at the Yukon Arts Centre a few years ago. She plans to pull in the expertise of Charlene Alexander (founder of the Great Northern Arts Festival in Inuvik) to help guide the young artists on matters of pricing.

Collins brings a respect for the craftsmanship of carving and mask making to her work. She says she's been learning more

about the use of line in these carvings' composition. She's looking forward to learning more from the artists about why people are using these traditional forms.

The day of our visit, the carvers pulled studio chairs into a circle. We discussed art galleries, commission rates, artist bios and titles for their work, while one of the carvers smoothed a mask's brow and cheekbone with a thin strip of sandpaper.

As part of the program, the carvers have 18 weeks of instruction time in Whitehorse on Thursday and Friday afternoons of weeks they're not at the retreat. They study the business side of a carving art practice with Mike Kramer.

Andrew Finton also helps with the business teaching, as well as the carving, teaching work ethic and life skills.

Donna Widdis, an employee at the Sundog Retreat, was cutting up onions when we went into the dining room to wait for Heather

to print up information. "The difference in them is amazing," she said.

"You see them when they walk in in September. Some of them have no knowledge of carving at all. And they walk out professional young carvers."

She observes the younger participants learn from the older ones, taking them as role models.

The art is the heart of the program for Heather Finton. She acknowledges the business side is valuable, but mostly, she believes in encouraging these young artists.

From what I saw of their pieces, it's well worth doing. You can take part too. The show opens 5 p.m. on Friday March 3. It continues until March 22.

Nicole Bauberger is a writer and painter living in Whitehorse. She is a member of the Yukon Artists @ Work, Yukon Art Society and Studio 204. You can see her work at those places and the Yukon Gallery on Main St.



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