

Ever curious, Fafard seeks new challenges in his work

BY ANDREW MATTE, QC OCTOBER 12, 2011



Joe Fafard amongst his sculptures.

Photograph by: Troy Fleece, QC

When he's asked to describe his most recent work, famed sculptor Joe Fafard often has to stand on the balls of his feet and reach high into the air.

Such is the case with the project underway at his rural Saskatchewan studio, which includes the formation of massive pieces of Styrofoam from which four bronze bison will emerge. Fafard is using a new idea to blend silhouette with traditional sculpture. The pieces were commissioned by Manitoba Hydro to stand outside a new environmentally-minded building in Winnipeg. Meant to stand artfully and symbolically at four corners of an intersection, the appearance of the eight-foot tall sculptures will change as people drive by.

"You can't picture it if you haven't seen it," the 5-foot-5, 130-pound Officer of the Order of Canada told QC.

"There are flat illusionist pieces that are also part of a full sculpture. It's going to be quite different. Not much like this has been seen."

Such is life for Fafard, the internationally recognized artist who moved from Regina 10 years ago to an 80-acre property 12 kilometres north of the Queen City.

Born in 1942 in Ste. Marthe, the French-speaking son of a general store owner began as a sculptor of clay and ceramics before moving to large bronze pieces like cows, bulls and pigs, which reflect his life in rural Saskatchewan. He has three children with his first wife — Gina, Misha and Joel — and two with his second wife, Alyce Hamon: son Julien, 13 and daughter Solenne, 17.

When Fafard isn't working on an art project — there are about a half-dozen in the works this month — he's doing business, most of it on logistics like getting exhibits assembled and shipped to galleries or taking orders from independent buyers.

Fafard will admit his life is sweet. His commute to work is a short walk down a gentle slope from his house to his studio, which includes what you might expect from one of Canada's most accomplished living sculptors. There's a printmaking studio, a woodworking area as well as larger studios where Fafard creates the large bulls, cows and horses that have been his trademark.

The Fafard compound — or Chez Nous as he calls it — is a reflection of Fafard's art. Decorated with trees and brush, the property is at the end of a long gravel road that includes a duck pond, a small two-storey fort/studio for his son, rolling grasslands and a red-roofed barn where chickens keep warm at night. A life-sized bronze bull and other large sculptures would look out of place in any other back yard, but not at Chez Nous. Fafard admits he never tires of looking at his own work.

"When we bought this property, there was nothing. But we planted all the trees. We built the house, we built the studio and we are able to work in these large gardens.

"I have always loved living in the country."

Fafard believes his enthusiasm to create art remains as strong today as it was when he first struck out as a "struggling artist." Age and experience are Fafard's reward — he just celebrated his 69th birthday — because he has the resources to do as he pleases, he said, whether it's satisfying his curiosity by learning a new sculpting technique or preparing for an exhibit of his drawings.

"You accumulate means, then you are able to do more things. But as a young struggling artist, you might not have the means . . . to do what you want. But after you have a successful run, you aren't scared to try new things," Fafard said. "It's easier to get excited. There is lots to be excited about."

It also helps that Fafard's profile has steadily risen over the decades and his work remains a big draw for galleries that feature his work. Demand for a Fafard, whether it's a massive sculpted hen, a small bronze or a sketch, has never been higher.

"I have more to do than ever. And I am able to do it with less effort. As you get more confident, you don't have to strain as much. I have clients from across the country who buy consistently."

Among his current curiosities is bringing more technology into the creation of the large bronze sculptures that still make up much of Fafard's work. Traditionally, he would build a full-sized piece from metal and clay, which would then be used to make a form to make the final bronze piece. Earlier this year, he began to experiment with a new technology that allows him to make a much smaller version of

a piece before sending it to a Regina studio that scans the piece and puts the information into a computer. From there, the digital information is used to create a full-sized version of the piece out of Styrofoam, which is covered in clay and used to make the mould for the final bronze. The new technique, which uses the technology of Silver Fox 3D Studios in Regina, means Fafard can skip the time-consuming job of making a large piece from scratch. Being able to make more sculptures while maintaining the integrity of his vision appeals to the artist.

“I get the same result but it gives me that much more capacity.”

Because the studio phone rings regularly from customers and galleries, and because his passion is as strong as it's ever been, Fafard scoffs at any suggestion of retirement.

“I think that if I were to retire, I would be doing the same thing anyway.”

Later this year, Fafard will travel to the National Gallery in Ottawa where his well-known running horses will be installed. Bought by the gallery some years ago, the series, which is laser-cut steel made to look like a group of life-size horses racing across a prairie field, will be seen from Sussex Drive on a patch of lawn near the gallery's parking garage.

The number of Fafard pieces that are permanently installed in public places across the country is growing. Others include a similar running-horses work in downtown Calgary, an identical series in Quebec City, the famous bulls lying in the lawn in Toronto's financial district, a steel silhouette of a buffalo in Edmonton and the Bonnie Buchlyvie sculpture at the University of Saskatchewan's agriculture building. That's on top of Oskana Ka-asasteki, the steel bison on Scarth Street in downtown Regina. (The iconic bison could be on the move — a new spot reserved for public art a few meters south of its current location could be considered by the city for its new home).

Timothy Long, head curator at the MacKenzie Art Gallery, is among Fafard's legion of fans. He curated a retrospective of Fafard's work in 2007, which stands as one of the most complete and wide-ranging exhibit of Fafard's work. A joint project between the MacKenzie and the National Gallery, the 70-piece exhibition represented Fafard's sculptures of animals and pieces, as well as drawings. After its showing in Regina, it toured for two years across Canada.

Long likes how Fafard is able to take an unconventional approach to traditional art.

“He takes the conventions of portraiture and conventions in how we render animals in art and he's stretching that in different directions,” said Long.

“He's very psychologically astute. He also likes to ask questions about society. He's also a small businessman. He employs a small army of people,” said Long, referring to the nine people Fafard employs full-time, two at his studio and seven at the Julienne Atelier Foundry in Pense where the metal work and welding take place.

Long's favourite Fafard piece is *The Terrorized*, a clay statue of a young man posed submissively while holding rocks in his hands. The piece, which was created in 1988 at the height of violence in Ireland, is

meant to show the terrorist as a victim.

The Terrorized's message is especially poignant now, given the new incidents of terrorism since the piece was completed. "It's interesting because this was made long before 9-11."

But Fafard is best known for his appreciation of the beauty of nature and animals, domestic and otherwise. As he chats about the beauty of a clucking chicken digging in the soil outside his studio, he acknowledges nature's creations also serve a more practical purpose. Later this year, Fafard said, "that will be our dinner ... we like poultry."

In the future, his only plan is to follow a path created by his own curiosity and further investigate how computers and modern techniques can help him illustrate his vision and make the process more efficient.

"Technology makes a whole new branch of creativity possible," he said. "But it is the curiosity of things that causes you to follow things. If you are curious, then you want to learn how things work.

"And that takes you places."

© Copyright (c) The Regina Leader-Post