

## An eclectic menagerie

Fafard's people, animals range from soulful to political to comic

By ELISSA BARNARD Arts Reporter  
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Cree Man, a bronze portrait sculpture by Joe Fafard, is one of the artist's many figures, in both clay and bronze, on exhibit at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. (Tim Krochak / Staff)

Joe Fafard's love of sculpture goes back to peering up at statues of the saints in a Roman Catholic church in the Saskatchewan farming community of Ste. Marthe.

Canada's famous sculptor of cows, horses and the human figure says wryly, "I had to spend a lot of time in church staring and looking at those, St. Antoine, St. Therese. I remember when the statues were taken down for cleaning and having a close-up view.

"When you examined them closely they were not normal. They were quite distorted."

"My herd," he says, pointing up to a cluster of small cows on the wall of Gallery Page and Strange, "they're distorted in size and shape to give an appearance of normalcy from this point.

"It depends on your point of view and our eyes deceive us all the time."

This month Nova Scotians have a rare opportunity to see Fafard's work in two exhibits, a commercial show of cows and horses at Gallery Page and Strange, 1869 Granville St., to Dec. 11, and a National Gallery of Canada/MacKenzie Art Gallery retrospective at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia to Feb. 8.

The retrospective takes Fafard's work from his early 1970s clay sculptural portraits of family members to his giant cast bronze and laser-cut steel farm animals. There is an entire herd of colourful, running horses on the gallery's first floor, and on the third floor, a storybook population of family, friends, aboriginal Canadians, artists and politicians.

Fafard grew up on a farm, the sixth of 12 children, surrounded by cows and horses. The grey horse at the AGNS called Silvers was his and the sculptor still rides on his land near Pense, where he has a foundry employing nine people.

Three of his grandparents came from Quebec, where artists were routinely employed by the church, so his French Canadian family easily accepted art as a career. "I just liked drawing as a kid and my family was very supportive."

At art college Fafard continued to draw and paint until his third year when he was required to study sculpture. "When I discovered I had an affinity for sculpture I decided to work from my strength and let my weakness (painting) fall by the wayside.

"It seemed the three dimensionality of sculpture appealed to me rather than the illusionistic rendering in a painting. Eventually I discovered you could do illusion in sculpture too."

His earliest clay portraits were of family members and friends. Ma Mère, 1972, is a glazed earthenware sculpture with acrylic paint that Fafard did from a memory of his mother. She sits in a house dress, one hand against her head, beside a shelving unit of baking dishes and a cow figurine.

"When I started her was when I first discovered my voice. I wanted to speak of the things

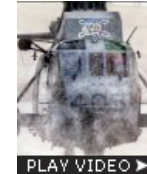
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I knew. I did my father and mother and my wife's grandmother. I found a way to express what I felt about them."

Curator Terrence Heath, a friend of Fafard's for over 40 years, says the artist is closer in spirit to author Alice Munro than any school of art.

"I think a book needs to be written, Canada, 1965 to 1975. I think it was a time when Canadian culture went to ground zero, the attempt to go down to what we know, our personal life, our community life and the people we know," says Heath, citing Munro, Theatre Passe Muraille artistic director Paul Thompson and Fafard. "I think it changed Canadian art."

The other key to Fafard is that "he continues to push to do something new," says Heath.

Fafard, whose son Joel is a musician who played the Stan Rogers Festival this summer, moved from clay into casting bronze figures and has embraced the technology of computer-programmed laser-cut steel. Two years ago he had a breakthrough in the industrial technique of powder coating to colour his metal animals and give them a shiny gloss as if they were glazed ceramics.

"It was just finding somebody in the business who was willing to listen to me. Up to then the powder coating industry wanted to do one colour — that's why transformers are grey. I found this small shop in Regina that does powder coating and the guy was willing to work with me on Saturdays and Sundays when his shop was closed. As soon as we started trying all kinds of things it started working."

Fafard has carved his sculptures from Styrofoam before they were bronzed. When his daughter, a woodworker, dropped off scraps he glued them together to build a trojan horse, now at Gallery Page and Strange, before casting it in bronze.

To construct the two-dimensional bull Othello, he welded the negative, leftover pieces from a giant laser-cut steel sculpture. The bull is full of line-drawn pictures including a tiny fleeing female figure who reminds the artist of Othello's innocent, young wife Desdemona.

One of Fafard's favourite artists is Picasso. "Picasso is very liberating because he gave you permission to do just about anything and he took permission to do almost everything."

Fafard's portraits of people and animals, all in wonderful detail, range from the soulful to the political to the comic. Among his aboriginal figures is an enigmatic man who is lying down and appears dead. "This is a victim of the Canadian army's attack on a small village in Saskatchewan called Batoche in 1885. Batoche was the Métis' last stand," says Fafard, who grew up in a Métis community. His next door neighbour had been at Batoche as a child.

None of Fafard's human figures is life-sized. "I don't like any confusion between art and life. Art is not life and I like to keep art as an object that speaks about life."

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