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No nice postcards

German artist Schaarschmidt gives own style to Cape Breton's natural beauty
By TERA CAMUS Cape Breton Bureau

INVERNESS Your eye is quickly pulled into the ruggedness captured under the glass, held tightly in place by faded wood borrowed from a 100-year-old barn.

Brightly colored acrylics and pastels or watercolors fill what was formerly white or brown paper with images that could easily be snapshots in time of life captured in Cape Breton Island, the key inspiration for German-born artist Uli Schaarschmidt since he first visited the area in 2003.

Dozens of his paintings, on display at the Inverness County Centre for the Arts until Tuesday, also depict other common themes from Nova Scotia including the adventures of fishermen at sea, majestic lighthouses, or the sorrow and blackness and death caused when Westray exploded in the late 1990s.

"Last year was one of the best times in my artist life," says ever-smiling and friendly, classically trained artist, talking in the centre where his framed and unframed works sell from several hundred to several thousand dollars.

"This is more than Impressionism . . . or Expressionism," he said. "This is something from reality of what I have looked at, and what my mind sees and some are fantasy."

In fact, Onni Nordman, a fellow artist from Cape Breton who is known for transforming life and concept into abstractions, considers Schaarschmidt, who is from Munich, a "new Blue Rider."

"From 1911 to 1914, Munich was the birthplace of the Blue Rider (Der Blaue Reiter), a fellowship of Expressionist painters which included such esteemed pioneers of modern art as Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, August Macke and Paul Klee. They all shared a common desire to express spiritual truths through their art."

Nordman explains that before Expressionism, art was made after the eye sees, the hand responds and the mind judges. "(But) Expressionism changed the process to this: the mind sees, the hand judges and the eye responds," Nordman said.

"A new inner-directed, trans-physical, modern art was born. It was not just spiritual, it was exciting."

Schaarschmidt admits God and spirituality play a big role in his artistry. Humour also helps, he says with a laugh.

"The Lord guided me in," he said. "My mind sees . . . the normal hardworking people, they don't talk so much. They have all the skills and experiences, and know how to do the job. I draw and paint and portray that in the same way as Cape Breton's natural beauties . . . my style follows the way like it is, rough to rough, smooth to smooth. I don't paint nice postcards. My work is like a mirror to be here."

His impression of Cape Breton during various visits obviously was one that included the rough or rugged faces of friendly people, the wind and the wavy seas all depicted in bright, clean, contrasting colors and wild lines.

One of the influences in his work is the Impressionist Claude Monet.

"Cape Breton influenced me with its people, its ocean, the wind, the sunshine and the rain," he said.

His work often involved stopping and pulling out his paper and painting or drawing on the ground when he spotted Eskasoni children playing last year, or an old man in Baddeck who walked up Main Street with a cane to share a few yarns with the artist.

"My mind sees and I go around, and I see you. My hands and feet work, I work with my body," he said, bending over and sashaying his hips left to right to illustrate how he'd use his feet and hands to paint on the ground. "I like to do it outside."

His work also includes images from Lunenburg, Peggys Cove, Brier Island and Halifax.

The Picton Castle is shown in one piece on a wild voyage at sea and from top to bottom beside it are the words of the 10 Commandment sketched faintly alongside it. He says the words are there to illustrate how life's wild ride can reach safe journey. "In my fantasy, I made it in full surf," he said. The yellows, blues, greens and browns of the ship, sky and sea mix to transport you on boarding that wild sea.

Schaarschmidt's website is <http://www.schaarschmidt.it>

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