

ARTISTS NORTH

Thunder Bay's Professionals

*Three of the founding members
of Artists North: Ruth Tye McKenzie,
Oliver Reimer, Michael Cavanaugh.*

by David Aurandt

ART

In 1981, several artists in Thunder Bay came together to found an organization which would provide for them, and for more artists who would join in the future, a professional context of the kind usually found in much larger centres. This context was intended to mean access to ideas and the sharing of artistic concerns as well as the enhancement of professional opportunities — all of which is never easy for the artist even in the major cities. So, although it was suprising to some who do not think of Thunder Bay as having artists of any kind, Artists North was established as a group of professional artists living and working in Thunder Bay and in the surrounding region of Northwestern Ontario. This is a group which takes seriously the commitment to the visual arts made by each of them at some time in their lives.

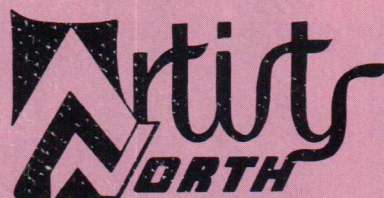
Artists North presently comprises about twenty-five active members, any of whom would undoubtedly confirm the difficulty of being such a professional. Very, very few artists have what might be called "career success" as it is commonly understood. Indeed, a small percentage of artists working professionally in Canada make a living from their art alone. The greater percentage work at something to make a living in order to be able to do the work which really drives their thoughts and desires: their art. This is a very difficult position to be in, doing what you have to do in order to be able to do what you want to do. Some have called it schizophrenic, but ironically, it seems to be one of the marks of the professional artist: this need to do something else so that you can do the only thing that makes any sense, the only thing worth doing.

Are these two dozen or so members of

Artists North then individually in this awkward and difficult position? I believe they would say yes, and this is one of the reasons artists organize themselves in the way that Artists North has done. So much of what an artist does is done alone, without reference to anyone or anything outside of himself and his ideas and imagination. This sort of aloneness and even loneliness is necessary but not always necessarily the best way to conduct one's art, especially when the lonely artist has only infrequent material success. The pursuit of art as a career is not easily described to one who does not do it, nor is it easily understood by those who do other things — all of which seem in their practicality eminently sensible when compared to art as a profession. For these and other reasons, artists "conspire" and come together.

In the three short years since Artists North was founded, there have been considerable achievements of common goals. The group has increased opportunities for its members to have exhibitions of high professional standards, for example, at The Thunder Bay National Exhibition Centre and Centre for Indian Art, at Confederation College and at Lakehead University. Just one year ago, Artists North hosted an extremely successful conference, "Art Means Business", in the city. And this year, the international "Year of the Artist", the group has mounted an ambitious project to have a juried exhibition for all artists in Northwestern Ontario which will tour the rest of the Province.

Three of the founding members of Artists North whose work is well-known in Thunder Bay and beyond the city are Ruth Tye McKenzie, Oliver Reimer and Michael Cavanaugh. These artists also share another common characteristic: all three of them are not originally from Thunder Bay.



*An association of professional
visual artists working in
Northwestern Ontario.
Besides the three artists
featured here, and the author
of our ART column,
David Aurandt,
the group includes:*

*Doreen Jetten
Doris Kramer
Judy Martin
Lori Hacio-Paterson
Jo-Anne Silverman
Barbara Sprague
Oliver Tiura
Geraldine Van Cram
Sylvia Wagner
Hildegard E. D. Whittle-Pflug
Nancy Bjorgo
Damon Dowbak
Jennifer Garret
Jonathan Hurdon*

*The Artists North logo shown
above was designed by
Ruth Tye McKenzie.*