

PEOPLE

Ceramicist explores the power of conceptual art

Michael Flaherty holding show at Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador in February

By SUSAN GAY DECKER
SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM

In 2009, Newfoundland artist, Michael Flaherty, who was long-listed for the prestigious Sobey Art Award earlier this year, spent three solitary months living on the now abandoned Grey Islands, off the east coast of the Great Northern Peninsula.

As a ceramicist, the job of firing clay is nothing new to him. But on the Grey Islands, Flaherty took the process to its extreme, deciding to fire the entire island as part of an ambitious conceptual art project.

To do this, he truly had to think outside of the kiln.

"I made this kiln that was inside out and because the kiln was inside out, you could conceive of the island as being inside the kiln. If you reverse things in your mind a little bit, firing the kiln then means firing the island in a conceptual sense."

His inspiration for the conceptual project stems partly from the training he received at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, where he majored in ceramics and studied art history, and from his subsequent work experiences in which he was immersed in the world of craft.

For one summer, Flaherty trained with a production potter in Ontario and he later spent four years working as co-ordinator, instructor and technician with the Craft Council Clay Studio in St. John's.

"Being a ceramicist, I deal with craft a lot and I really think that craft is a conceptual thing. We tend to think of craft as being nice and pretty ... but in the 1800s when the word started to be used in the art context, craft was meant to be a revolutionary force, a conceptual break from the ordinary canon of art.



Michael Flaherty took his own photo during his stay on the Grey Islands. — Submitted photo

"I think there's a real historical precedence for conceptualism in craft and I wanted to take it to the extreme."

This is not the first art project Flaherty has undertaken during which he took a metaphorical concept to its practical limits.

As part of his Master of Fine Arts at the University of Regina, he constructed a massive, open-walled kiln within an art gallery space. With guests present, he placed unfired pieces in the kiln and turned on the heat, allowing them to smell the electricity, feel the heat, and witness the glazes melting.

Flaherty says he wanted the viewers to experience the moment when clay becomes ceramic, but because there was enough heat to injure someone who got too close, the show was also meant to explore the link between danger and formation — or transformation.

Some of the feedback to the show was critical. Some viewers said it was an affront to traditional aesthetics and resurrected the age-old questions that probe what art is or isn't.

"A lot of people asked me how someone

could tell the difference between an artist and a technician, or an artist and a manufacturer," says Flaherty. "It's so hard to define art, but I think of art in an operational sense I suppose. If it's in an art gallery then it's art, or if a bunch of people look at it agree that it's art, then it's art by consensus."

The questions surrounding the definition of art were answered in different ways during another more interactive art exhibit — The Bicycle Rehabilitation Project — that he undertook in 2007 when he pedalled across the country setting up bicycle repair clinics in various art galleries across Canada and the United States.

In the Victoria, B.C. art space, The Ministry of Casual Living, Flaherty had a memorable experience that illustrates the richness and versatility the term art has for him.

His bicycle repair clinic attracted many neighbourhood residents who had not known the art space was a gallery, and had never set foot in there.

One woman, who said she knew nothing about art, had brought her bike in for repair. She also asked Flaherty to name her bike for her. When he couldn't think of a moniker she returned a few days later and said that she had decided to name it Art.

"She went through this whole transformative thing of not knowing anything about this gallery ... even blocking it out of her mind, but the experience affected her in some way," he says. "And she got a much nicer ride out of it."

Flaherty will hold a show at the Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador from Feb. 4 to March 11.

The show will feature ceramic sculptures inspired by the Grey Islands caribou and found shards of pottery belonging to the islands' former residents.

MUSIC

Newfoundland clarinetist comes full circle

By STEVEN MAZEY

POSTMEDIA NEWS SERVICE—OTTAWA

He was a 19-year-old clarinet student in St. John's who dreamed of a career in music, so Sean Rice says it was a thrilling, frightening and confidence-boosting experience when the National Arts Centre Orchestra (NACO) came to town and invited him to perform as a soloist.

It was November of 2002, and Rice was a second-year student at Memorial University.

The orchestra was in St. John's as part of a tour of Atlantic Canada. Orchestra staff had heard Rice's solo with the Newfoundland Symphony that year, and thought he'd be a great addition to the NACO's matinee for students at Holy Heart of Mary High School, the school from which Rice had graduated.

With the NACO and conductor Jean-Philippe Tremblay, Rice performed a movement from Weber's "Clarinet Concerto No. 2."

Teenagers from across the city cheered for one of their own and NACO principal clarinet Kimball Sykes later described Rice as showing "a natural musicality" and "a level you don't always see in a student." Rice said he remembers, "Being thrilled, excited and slightly intimidated. That was my first big engagement. I was flattered, and it meant a lot."

As part of the tour, Rice had a master class with Sykes, one of dozens of teaching events that are part of the orchestra's tours. When the orchestra left town, Rice continued taking occasional classes with Sykes through video conference sessions.

It gave the young player an early taste of orchestra life, and in Rice's case, a glimpse into his future.

After finishing at Memorial University, going on to graduate and doctoral studies at New York's Juilliard School and winning prizes that included the Quebec Symphony Concerto Competition, Rice was

named the NACO's new second clarinet in late 2010. Succeeding the late Peter Smith, Rice was chosen from more than 50 players who went through demanding, multi-round auditions.

Rice, now 28, started at the National Arts Centre (NAC) last December and says he loves "being back in Canada again and being part of such a great orchestra and wind section."

He said he's been particularly excited lately. He and the band are about to head to his hometown, where his proud parents, music teachers and friends will have their first chance to hear Rice with the orchestra since he got the job.

This weekend, the orchestra heads to Newfoundland, the first stop on a tour of Atlantic Canada Nov. 13 to 25 that will include nine concerts and 80 education events. Ottawa audiences will hear a preview of some tour repertoire in concerts Wednesday and Thursday at the NAC, with conductor Julian Kuerti and 16-year-old Canadian pianist Jan Lisiecki.

The tour will include Brahms' "Symphony No. 1," Mozart's "Piano Concerto No. 20" and a new piece by Canadian composer John Estacio, who will travel with the orchestra to talk about his music and work with student composers.

In a neat bit of symmetry, the tour will take Rice back to the school where he first performed with the NACO, this time to solo in the third movement of the Mozart "Clarinet Concerto." Rice will also give a master class to wind players at Memorial University, helping students the way NACO players helped him nine years ago.

"It's great to come full circle. It has a lot of meaning for me to be going back to my old high school, on the stage where I first met the NAC, and I love that we're going to my hometown as the very first tour that I'm a part of," Rice said last week in a coffee shop near his ByWard Market apartment.



Sean Rice is the new second clarinetist of the National Arts Centre Orchestra, who joined last year. He is from Newfoundland and will be going home with the tours to the Atlantic provinces later this month. — Photo by Bruno Schlumberger/The Ottawa Citizen

"My parents are thrilled and it's nice to be going back to the school where there is such a great music program."

He says teacher Grant Etchegary, who taught Rice music at Holy Heart of Mary, and Etchegary's wife Vincenza, who taught him music in elementary and junior high school, were a big reason for his love of music. Rice started on clarinet in Grade 4, and says he might not have had music in his life if it hadn't been for the strong music programs in his schools.

In addition to performing at student matinees in St. John's, Moncton, N.B. and CFB Gagetown, N.B. Rice said he's delighted to be doing some teaching on tour.

Other musicians will offer master classes at universities and coach high school and children's ensembles. Budgeted at \$765,000, the tour will include public concerts in St. John's, Charlottetown, P.E.I., Halifax,

N.S., Moncton, N.B. Fredericton, N.B., Saint John, N.B., and Halifax, N.S. as well as three student matinees.

"One of the most important things about being a musician is connecting with your audiences and with audiences elsewhere. It's great that the NAC is going out to other places, so people in other cities can experience their national orchestra, too. The education component is incredible. It's healthy for music and good for communities," Rice said.

As it did with Rice nine years ago, the orchestra has invited musicians from the region to perform. Choirs in each city will perform before concerts.

Guest soloists for student matinees include Moncton fiddler Samantha Robichaud and Newfoundland fiddler Danielle Green.

Rice's first contact in 2002 led to a relationship with the NAC he said was a big part of his musical devel-

opment.

The NAC brought Rice to Ottawa in 2003 for a recital as part of the Atlantic Scene festival. In 2005, before heading to Juilliard for his graduate degree, Rice spent three weeks in Ottawa studying with Sykes as part of the NAC's summer training program. He returned the following summer.

But that background didn't give Rice any advantages when the clarinet position opened in 2010. Along with dozens of others who had impressive credentials and training behind them, Rice had to audition from behind a screen.

Applicants remain anonymous for the first few rounds to ensure the audition committee chooses players based on their playing and not because the committee members might know some of the candidates.

Rice said he prepared for the auditions for two months, practising more than a dozen musical excerpts he had been told he might be asked to play, from Mozart to Stravinsky.

After three rounds of auditions behind screens, it was only in the final rounds that Rice and the other three semifinalists performed in view for the committee, he said.

After being chosen as one of two players in the final running, Rice still had to perform a trial, sitting in the section for a week of rehearsals and concerts to see how the orchestra musicians thought Rice fit in.

"They're very rigorous here, and that's good," said Rice, who a few weeks after his trial received the news he'd landed the job.

"It's so competitive now to get a job and there are so many great musicians. After being a student for so long, so it's great to be working. I have learned so much from my colleagues, who have great sounds and musicianship. I feel very lucky to be sitting in that section."

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