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The Lure of the Labrador Research Station

By Robin McGrath

If you've ever wanted to go north but weren't sure quite how to set about it, new opportunities have opened up in Labrador. An Artist-in-Residence Program in Labrador was founded by the Labrador Institute and Grenfell Campus Art Gallery/Fine Arts Division of Memorial University to support artists with current and new projects requiring a stimulating northern environment with the possibility of cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Situated in the Labrador Institute's Research Station, the program provides artists with living and studio space in the historic, multicultural town of North West River immediately adjacent to the Innu reserve of Sheshatshiu.

Previous artists who have taken up residence in the Research Station include Anne Troake (visual art and video), John K. Sampson (songwriter), Eden Robinson (writer) and Geoff Butler (painter and musician), as well as Amy Malbeuf, Melissa Michelin and Steve Evans (visual arts).

Geoff Butler, who was born in Fogo Island, lives in Nova Scotia and was sponsored in part by ArtsNS for travel and personal expenses. Butler says he read a good deal about Labrador before applying for the residency in 2015 and was particularly interested in the Grenfell Mission, indigenous peoples, the harnessing of Labrador's huge resources, trapping culture, and Moravian history. In the end, he came up with a project that allowed him to tap into all these things: an illustrated Ode to Labrador.

"I felt history come to life when I got to North West River," Butler admits. "I felt a familiarity with some of the things I'd read about." Labrador's Ode was written in the 1920s by Dr. Harry Paddon, and discovering Dr. Paddon's house was only a gunshot away from the Research Station made the project come alive for the artist.

Butler held an open house/studio every Wednesday and invited the community to come and comment on his progress as he worked on the 25 oil paintings that make up the Illustrated Ode. Some brought their own work for critique and several regulars took the opportunity to try out the oil sticks Butler uses in his work. With input from a dozen different local people, Butler's work soon reflected both the historic and modern life he saw in North West River. The Illustrated Ode to Labrador was published by Creative Books in December, 2016.

The current artist-in-residence at North West River is Kay Burns, founder/curator of the Museum of the Flat Earth in Fogo Island. During her time in residence, Kay plans to investigate the curvature of the earth by travelling onto Lake Melville by skidoo and setting up a viewing scope that will enable her to spot collaborators 9.65 kilometers distant on the ice. Documentation and video interviews will support her observations, which are based on Zetetic philosophy and rooted in the idea of "observable phenomena" as the impetus for skeptical inquiry.

Residencies run from 4 to 12 weeks, subject to availability, and applications are welcome from all disciplines. Applicants are reminded that projects that require little specialized equipment are best suited to the program. Queries can be made to the Grenfell Campus Art Gallery.



Geoff Butler and Mavis Penney at an Open Studio session