

# Love of land inspires Antigonish artists

## ANTIGONISH ARTS



**SHELLEY THOMPSON**

**S**OMETHING is shifting in the Ohio valley, Antigonish County.

Something that's encouraging, nurturing, that's protecting and coaxing the land to provide in a sustainable way, that's cultivating ideas of community and co-operation, and that's preserving and emulating the rural traditions of our past. A movement forward, re-ferring back.

The Backroads, Hay, Tools and Clay, at the St. FX Art Gallery, presents work by ceramicist Fenn Martin in collaboration with painter Nicholas Johnson.

It is a powerful representation of the artistic energy emanating from the co-operative, organic farm in Ohio that is the centre of this stirring.

Martin, trained at NSCAD, creates decorative tiles, busts, and friezes in the tradition of ancient cultures. Neither Martin's nor Johnson's subject matter, however, derives from history.

It emerges from their days of maintaining, building, planning, planting and harvesting, and from their recognition of the intrinsic value of old, simpler, sustainable ways.

Martin has long been fascinated with the friezes and ceramics of antiquity that recorded information about those societies.

His pieces are also narratives, recordings in three dimensions, straining off the walls.

The Co-op is a perfect example of this and appropriate to Antigonish with its history of the Co-operative movement.

Like their ancient precursors, Martin's friezes document social phenomena, with one striking difference. Those ancient works repre-



Artists Nicholas Johnson, left, and Fenn Martin are featured in the exhibit, *Backroads, Hay, Tools and Clay*, at St. FX Art Gallery, until Feb. 8. There will be an artist's talk today at noon.



**A Certain Light Slant**, by Fenn Martin and Nicholas Johnson, is in their latest exhibit.



**For The Old Machine** artist Nicholas Johnson painted directly with oils on Fenn Martin's ceramic tiles shaped like a chapel window.

sented lives of the privileged classes. These crowded, dynamic works reflect ordinary people in times we recognize, and are reminiscent of Mexican Diego Rivera, and his commitment to

the common man.

Johnson, also fascinated with ancient techniques, apprenticed with Ernest Fuchs in Austria, learning medieval painting skills while working on a chapel. Nowhere is this more evident than in pieces like *The Old Machine*, where Johnson paints directly with oils on Martin's ceramic tiles shaped like a chapel window, giving us a sense of looking through those windows of the past, into today.

The receding backs of two men, and the decaying machine in clay relief at the base of the painting give it a sense of pathos and regret.

Regret and time passing is a recurring theme. Many of the collaborative works are infused with a sense of what is being lost almost as we watch. Architecturally beautiful ancient barns, with their layered floors and decaying walls, are juxtaposed with trailers; a painted tale of a neglected countryside, punctuated with beautifully fashioned tiles.

The preoccupation with the changing landscape as a result of the rural exodus is at the forefront of this exhibition.

Forests fall into neglect, machines are left to rust, belying their original use and former importance in the rural economy.

The artists are immersed in the observation of the ravages of the exodus, but are simultaneously trying to reverse them, by learning from those who remain.

Hence the significance of the series of busts created by Martin, of several local farmers and woodlot owners who have become the artists' friends and mentors. The likenesses are uncanny, but there is something more pleasing and poetic than the sheer skill of Martin's execution. These mentors have been honoured in the way that Roman senators or philosophers might have been. Yet these are not noblemen. In Martin's eyes, however, in Martin's hands, they are Noble Men — Men who've learned from the land, and their own histories, and have taught and encouraged Martin and Johnson, and anyone else who comes to this Ohio centre.

Walter Ostrom, Martin's teacher at NSCAD and a world renowned ceramicist, says Martin "is incredibly talented, but he also has industry. It's been amazing to see his sensibility develop, his ideas crystallize. The economics, the sociology, the history involved, all emerge in his work. And he's living it."

At the exhibition's opening, local farmer Henry Joosten took pride in pointing out details in the pieces.

"I love the way Fenn talks about tools, and uses tools — pliers, clippers, screwdrivers," Joosten says. "He pressed patterns into the tiles, which are now part of pictures of things I know well. The barn. The forest. It's wonderful to see what I know. He probably tries to say some things I don't quite grasp, but I grasp that. The respect. The beauty they've made."

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Freelance writer Shelley Thompson lives in Antigonish.