

Urban artist finds inspiration in Bancroft



By Harold Eastman

Artist James Fowler is heading into his second consecutive all-nighter. Armed with bags of Twizlers, bite-size KitKats and a tub of Jujubes, he's got 36 hours for finish the massive, intricate painting hanging on the wall of his temporary studio at Bancroft's A Place for the Arts. It's Friday evening, and the piece is due to be installed in Toronto on Monday.

And what a piece it is. The 20-foot by five-foot painting is a colourful interpretation of Toronto's Regent Park neighbourhood as seen from directly overhead. It's a feast for the eyes, schematic and playful at the same time, commissioned by the owners of a new apartment building that's part of the Regent Park revitalization project.

So how did a young, successful and well-known Toronto artist end up sweating a deadline in a hundred-year old building in remotest Bancroft? James being James, he's happy to put down his brush and provide some answers, as well as some thoughts about why more artists from the city may be heading this way.

'When I got the commission last fall,' Fowler explains, 'I realized that my own studio in Toronto wasn't going to be big enough.' He started asking around about space, and fellow Toronto artist Joey Bruni made a long-shot offer: would James like to use the house that Joey had recently purchased on the outskirts of Bancroft? The idea of a little northern exposure had a natural appeal for Fowler, who was born and raised in North Bay. So he took the plunge.

In the end, the Bruni house proved too small for his painting purposes, but Fowler liked Bancroft. He asked around about studio space in town, and soon heard about the new artist's co-operative, A Place for the Arts. The co-op's Bridge Street location, it turned out, had big doors, plenty of wall-space and a paint-spill-friendly ambience. And the co-op members were delighted to have him. Fowler moved his huge, blank canvas into the space in early December and went to work.

In the ensuing weeks, the outgoing and personable artist has become a fixture at the co-op, always up for a little coffee and banter or a serious conversation about art, either in front of his evolving canvas or on the co-op shop's distinctive orange sofa. In fact, his continual presence in the studio has played a key role in making A Place for the Arts the creative hang-out space its founders had envisioned.

The Regent Park piece may be nearly complete, but Fowler plans to spend a lot more time in the Bancroft area. In fact, he foresees more Toronto artists coming up this way. 'I feel like the area could become 'the Hamptons of Ontario',' he says, referring to the

region at the northeast end of Long Island that became a rural haven for Manhattan artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning in the 1940s and 50s. 'Artists have always been drawn here, and there's already a strong arts community. But I think even more, and younger, artists are starting to come from Toronto, Ottawa, even Montreal. Last fall, I kept running into people in the Toronto arts community who had just bought property near Bancroft, or who were looking.'

Fowler's friend Joey Bruni, is a case in point. Bruni bought his house just outside Bancroft on Highway 28 East in order to establish an artist residency program. Starting this summer, up to six artists from Toronto will be living at the house, and working in the barn, which Bruni is renovating as studio space.

In fact, Bruni's project is the second such program to open in the area in the past 12 months. The former director of Trinity Square Video in Toronto, Roy Mitchell, bought a farmhouse in the hamlet of Hybla last year and has launched the Hybla Residency. The first resident was Ottawa video artist Penny McCann. Fowler expects that other residency programs will spring up, and that word of mouth about arts-friendly North Hastings will draw an increasing number of creative people to visit, work and live here.

For now, though, the clock is ticking on Fowler's deadline. It's time to wrap up the interview and pick up that brush again. Toronto's calling. He has to finish the mammoth painting, clear coat it and get it to the city by Monday morning.

Never fear, though. James Fowler will be back. And he won't be alone.