

Grand old lion of B.C. art scene passes away

Bill Featherston exhibited his work all over the world, but also took time to influence a new generation of artists as a devoted instructor

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William Featherston, one of the grand old lions of the B.C. art world, died Friday at the age of 81 after a brief, brave battle with cancer.

His longtime art dealer and friend Frans Wynans said one of the moments he remembered best was Featherston's great, epic Sparwood coal mine paintings commissioned by Edgar Kaiser.

"Edgar asked Bill to put a little colour in the faces of the miners and Bill said, 'No!'" Wynans recalled. "But Edgar insisted and offered more money, to which Bill replied, 'What colour would you like?'"

Featherston returned the paintings unaltered -- and Kaiser this time liked the results and paid up.

Featherston was born in Toronto, grew up in the Depression and used a phoney birth certificate to enlist in the navy at 16 so he could join the rest of the men in his family fighting overseas.

He served in the Atlantic and Pacific theatres before coming home in 1946.

Back in Canada, he went to work in a rubber factory and was quickly fired.

He liked to boast he was canned from many more jobs before being jailed in Austin, Texas, for trying to enlist in the U.S. air force under false pretenses.

When he was repatriated, Veterans' Affairs paid to send him back to school and he eventually earned a teaching certificate.

While teaching at a reform school, Featherston obtained a BA, but it was the experience of the borstal that ignited his social conscience.

That sense of social justice became a blaze when he attended the Ontario College of Art and was introduced to Marx, Keats, Shelley and Trotsky. All of it led him to move to Europe.

"I left Canada in 1958 to teach in Ireland," Featherston said.

"I followed up with a trip to England which lasted for 12 years. I had shown in Canada [two solo exhibitions with Jack Pollack in Toronto] but England was the real beginning of my art career. I settled in St. Ives, Cornwall and was soon immersed in a fabulous art community. I associated

with artists working at that time: Francis Bacon, Patrick Heron, Barbara Hepworth, poets and playwrights: W.S. Graham, John Antrobus... among many others."

In all, he worked and exhibited for 15 years in Europe before returning to Canada after a brief stop in the U.S.

Throughout his career, he had major shows in London, Edinburgh, Toronto, Washington, D.C. and Vancouver, which gave him a major retrospective.

His oeuvre in general incorporates references to art history and political satire, although pure elements of colour and texture remain manifest.

Featherston taught at many major art schools and universities. In particular, he was an instructor for 10 "long years" at the Vancouver School of Art -- before it was named Emily Carr University -- and inspired a generation, among them Attila Richard Lukacs and the group who styled themselves the Young Romantics.

"Bill was the most important teacher of art and life for me," artist Laurie Papou said.

"Not a day goes by that I don't hear his gruff voice in my ear praising or scolding me and now that he's gone I am even more grateful for that. I will miss him for always."

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Most recently, Featherston exhibited at the Art Gallery of South Okanagan in Penticton and Cascadia Fine Art in Vancouver -- strong new work addressing the politics and trauma of the U.S.-led "New World Order."

A war veteran and peace advocate, he disdained the corporate agenda embedded within America's aggressive foreign policy and was a sharp critic of the military-industrial complex.

Featherston was diagnosed with bladder cancer about two months ago.

Wynans said his old friend went quietly into that good night Friday with his family close by.

"I believe Bill's work is not adequately documented or represented in Canada's major museums," he said. "We'll be working on that."

My pal is survived by his wife of 38 years, Gail Bigsby, their sons Steve and Billy, and his daughters Susan and Sasha.

A memorial is planned for the Squamish Legion on Sunday, May 17.

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