

Photos focus on natural environment

Dougal Bichan's exhibit explores patterns of French River and Georgian Bay rock formations.

by Margo Little
for The Sudbury Star

Gore Bay - The granite rocks and windswept pines that lured the legendary Group of Seven painters to northern Ontario, continue to beckon artists and photographers.

The intriguing natural formations of the French River and Georgian Bay take centre stage in a current exhibit at the Gore Bay heritage centre on Manitoulin Island.

Toronto photographer Dougal Bichan frequently escapes his corporate commitments to paddle the waterways of the north. He deliberately seeks out isolated settings as an antidote to his usual urban preoccupations.

Bichan produces, directs and develops projects in a variety of media for corporate clients. He also runs a company that creates marketing and e-commerce solutions for organizations.

But in summer he can be found on Lake Kagawong and other northern waterways.

"I usually choose places where the only way you can get there is by canoe. It is important to get out and appreciate what nature has to offer," he said during an artist's reception July 17.

Photography has been a lifelong passion for Bichan. As a teenager he set up a darkroom in the basement of his parent's house. Over the past four decades he has refined his

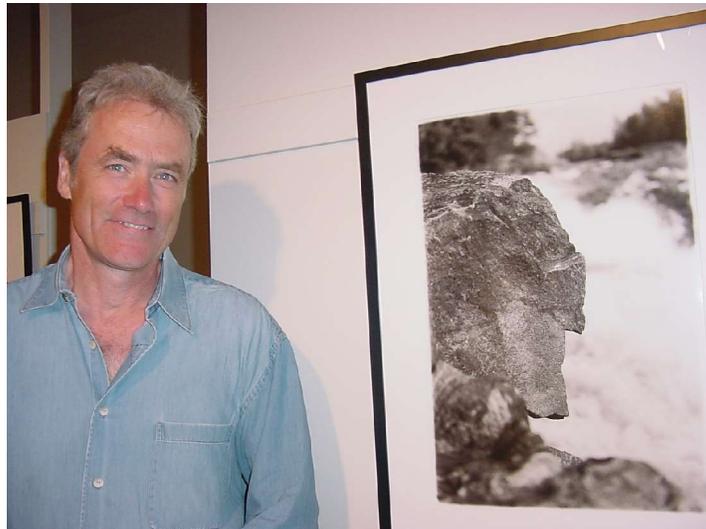


photo by Margo Little
Dougal Bichan displays La Chute Du Diable, part of a photography exhibit at the Gore Bay Museum Heritage Centre. Bichan's work focuses on natural patterns in the environment. The show continues until August 7 on Manitoulin Island.

printing techniques and his personal vision.

"I am drawn to textures, shapes and colours in natural forms," he explained.

The enduring fissures, gashes, cracks and gorges left by the retreating glaciers of 11,000 years ago are still endlessly fascinating for this multi-media specialist. During glaciation, rock scraped against rock and thick ice flowed over the uneven terrain. Today the timeless striations reveal intricate patterns to the practiced eye.

Wherever the forces of nature have left their mark, Bichan has travelled. The exhibit includes images from the Spanish River, Carrolwood Bay and other secluded spots.

His signature piece, La Chute Du Diable, taken on the Coulonge River in western Quebec, illustrates his love for naturally occurring sculpture. The devil image juts out over raging white water rapids below.

As he documents the primal power of Manitoulin rock formations, Bichan sometimes makes allusions to Chinese art conventions. He compares the parallel scratches in the rockface to the

"dragon lines" or paths of energy often present in Chinese paintings.

Although interpretation always remains in the eye of the beholder, viewers often marvel at the mirror images present in the rock formations.

Canoe trips to the mouth of the French River have also provided sensational scenery for his viewfinder. "It is absolutely beautiful there," he noted. "Some of the rocks are a gorgeous, reddish-brown colour."

The rusty coloured rocks of the area inspired Bichan to experiment with selected sepia toning for this exhibit. In a previous show on Manitoulin in 2000, he displayed some hand coloured images.

Not all photos are improved by technical intervention, he has discovered. For instance, he set out to enhance prints of Shrigley Bay and came to realize that colouring would not augment the power of the piece. The stark craters in the rock speak for themselves.

"Colour gives a whole different meaning to an image. Sometimes colour distracts from the impact and makes it into a pretty picture. The colouring process can make it lose some of its strength," he concluded.

For his outdoor excursions, Bichan leaves behind his commercial digital photography and returns to his 35mm Nikon. He uses the darkroom facilities of Toronto's Gallery 44 to experiment with black and white.

"With digital photography you can go on forever making changes and additions and subtractions," he said.

"But with this method it's all done by hand so there is more art involved. Every piece has the personal touch."

For Bichan, creative photography helps him achieve balance in life. He continues to maintain a busy teaching and consulting business in Toronto, yet retreats to Georgian Bay to recharge his batteries each summer.

In his view, "Every politician and business person should get out and go canoeing. It would lead people to more thoughtful decisions and to more appreciation of the effects of their decisions." However, the delights of the north are not for a privileged few with the daring to venture off the beaten track.

"The reason I do these shows is to point the way for other people. Go out and see these things for yourself. Anyone can see these patterns (in nature). You just have to take the time and energy to do it. You just need to slow down and look at things more closely."

The exhibition is on display at the Gore Bay Museum Heritage Centre until August 7.