

Self-Employed Artists' Workshop Series fills a gap

LIZ WARWICK

It's a question university students routinely ask at this time of year: How am I going to make a living doing what I love? If that student happens to be studying fine arts, music or writing, the question becomes more urgent and somewhat poignant.

According to a Statistics Canada "Focus on Culture" report from August 2000, fewer than half of young people defined as "cultural workers" (meaning they had studied fine arts, dance, music, literature, etc.) were working in the cultural industries. Those who did find work in a culture-related field earned on average about \$9,000 less than their peers. Sadly, the report concluded, "the majority of recent graduates of arts and culture programs did not find work in their chosen field." Not a pretty picture.

But it is a picture that Montreal artist Sophie Brunet knows quite well. She graduated in 1999 from Concordia University with a BFA in Studio Art. Halfway through her second year at university, the reality of her situation hit hard. "I was completely depressed because I realized that I would have to make money at this and I wasn't learning anything to help me do it," she says. "I also had friends who were graduating and there was nothing in front of them."

In the summer of 1998, Brunet headed west to Sausalito, Calif., a picturesque community nestled into the hills north of San Francisco. Sausalito has a long history of welcoming artists and, for the first time, Brunet was surrounded by artists earning a livelihood doing what they loved. In what became a sort of apprenticeship, Brunet started asking questions and learning how to sustain herself, both eco-

nomically and emotionally. She came back to Montreal, finished her degree and started developing contacts in the arts community. Since graduating, she's painted murals, storefronts and sets (both for theatre and film), helped create a huge Christmas tableaux that was shipped to Hollywood, and shown her work in various galleries and local cafés. During that time, Brunet has managed to sell about half of her own works of art.

Though Brunet has bucked the statistical trend, there are plenty of young graduates out there who haven't. Just ask Susan Molnar, Quebec career counselor for Youth Employment Services in Montreal; for the past four years, she has seen hundreds of young artists enter her office. To help them, Molnar began building a library of resource books that people could consult. Then, Molnar, who has organized employment conferences for YES, hit on the idea of a conference devoted to working as an artist.

Overflow crowd at initial conference

In five weeks, Molnar took the idea and made it a reality. On June 5, the day of the event at the Centaur Theatre, she had to turn away 50 people at the door. The lucky ones who attended kept saying they wanted more: more information, more chances to network, more opportunities to polish their marketing and business skills. So Molnar designed the 10-part "Self-Employed Artists Workshop Series."

Started in the fall of 2000, the series has covered topics such as writing grant proposals, accounting procedures for artists, and how to market artistic works. Some sessions have focused on specific fields including publishing, fashion and film. The series has proved so popular that YES will be repeating its grant-writing workshop on May 3.

For Molnar, the workshops have succeeded because they meet a real need. "No one is offering these kinds of services, either in English or in French," she says. "Artists are so often on their own. It's ironic in a way because it's a small community, but people need a place where they can network and learn from each other."

Absolutely true, says Brunet, who recently attended the workshop entitled Painting and Drawing: How to Sell Your Work. Led by local artist James Peter Simon, the workshop allowed artists, young and old, to discuss everything from pricing work to keeping faith in oneself and one's work. Brunet, 29, says she felt a part of the group. "We all had pretty much the same issues and Simon was so encouraging."

Getting artists talking among themselves is a big part of the workshops. "Many of our attendees are recent graduates, but some are older artists. So there's a lot of sharing going on," says Molnar. "We're learning about resources that are out there," she adds, such as Main Film, a co-op that rents film equipment for reasonable rates.

Molnar is hoping to expand the series to 20 workshops next year. Some will focus on specific fields such as dance, theatre, graphic design and sculpture. Other sessions will cover marketing, accounting and taxes. "Artists today know they need business skills," she says.

For Brunet, the artist's life means finding a balance between creating, selling and keeping the creative spark and energy alive. "Every day, I ask myself if I'm crazy to be doing this," she says. "But this is the only thing that I really want to be doing."

❖ For more information on the YES workshops for artists, call (514) 878-9788, extension 306, or visit the Web site (www.yesmtl.org).

❖ To see more of Sophie Brunet's work, visit her Web site (www.artists-in-residence.com/~sophiebrunet).



Self-Portrait, by Sophie Brunet; oil on cardboard.

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