

# LIFE & ARTS

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## Artists' group hopes to return to glory days



Morley Walker

**S**OMETIMES there is no percentage in growing old. Ask the Manitoba Society of Artists.

Having reached the venerable age of 100, and preparing for the Sunday opening of its 70th annual juried exhibition, this longstanding body of visual art practitioners usually finds itself on the outside of the cultural establishment.

Despite a current membership roll in excess of 80, the MSA has no building or even office to call home. The best it can do for exhibit space is an empty store in a shopping mall.

It gets little respect from the movers and shakers in the highbrow visual arts community and no operat-

ing grant from those arbiters of taste at the Manitoba Arts Council.

In fact, the council has in recent years reduced its modest allocation to the MSA's juried exhibition from \$4,000 to \$2,000.

"It's an understatement to say we're disappointed," says Gerald Folkerts, a former MSA president and current editor of the association's newsletter.

"It's like they're telling us, 'OK, you made it to 100. Now die, already.'"

This attitude galls them. The MSA predates the entire arts-funding apparatus, federally and provincially, by several decades.

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Jurors Don Reichert, left, John Marok inspect works.

### Walker

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The organization, which has a combined historical membership of 350, once boasted such luminaries as W.J. Phillips, Robert Bruce and LeMoine FitzGerald.

Its members were, in fact, instrumental in helping to establish the Winnipeg Art Gallery and the University of Manitoba School of Art.

"I often say that we're like an elderly parent who has watched his children become more successful than they were," says Folkerts, a full-time painter himself.

"But I think we still have an important role to play, especially in offering young artists support, encouragement and venues for exhibiting their work."

The MSA has been on a bit of birthday binge. Members are still reeling from the excitement of the April 30 opening of the WAG's show of MSA historical work.

That exhibit, consisting of 49 pieces dating to the mid-1960s from the WAG collection, runs through July 28.

This Sunday at 2 p.m., the organization will cut the ribbon on its 70th annual juried exhibition on the second level of cityplace downtown, formerly Eaton Place.

The show, being formally opened by WAG director Pat Bovey, runs through July 26. It consists of 100 watercolours, acrylics, oils, sculpture, and textile works by 74 artists, about half of them MSA members. The jurors were Quebec artist John Marok and former U of M art professor Don Reichert.

"There's some very nice work in this show," says Reichert, 70, a respected painter in his own right. "The MSA has a good group of people now. They're quite forward-looking."

Most of the works in the juried exhibition will be for sale. The prices range from about \$250 all the way to \$8,000. The latter is for an original acrylic, *Dreams of Glory*, by Winnipeg Free Press creative director Glenn Hayes, "the Norman Rockwell of River Heights."

Beginning Aug. 3 for a month, the Main/Access Gallery in the Artspace Building (100 Arthur St.) will play host to the MSA's 100th Anniversary Exhibition, consisting of works from the present membership only.

"That exhibit will totally say what we are," says Yisa Akinbolaji, 41, the MSA's recently elected president. "Everything will be super. I can guarantee that."

To gain admittance to the MSA, artists must submit slides of their work to a jury, detail an exhibition history and demonstrate a passionate commitment to visual art.

Several, such as sculptor Leo Mol, do very well indeed. Still, while members boast technical proficiency, few have broken through to shows at the main publicly funded galleries or even at the Site collective, where the so-called in-crowd of Winnipeg's contemporary artists display their work.

It's also rare for an MSA member to snag an arts grant, as Thompson resident Teresa Burrows did a few years

ago. The reasons for this are varied, but they often amount to differences in style and philosophy from those of the establishment.

Many MSA members are uncomfortable with the grant system or are self-sufficient through other careers. There is no "house style" among MSA members, but their work tends to fall on the opposite end of the spectrum from the wacky installation work, video, photography and performance art favoured by the gallery elites.

"We're not saying don't fund that kind of contemporary work," says Folkerts, 44, who recently had a solo show of oils, *Restless Slumber*, at the Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery.

"But the arts councils could take a more broadminded approach."

Burrows acknowledges that the MSA can sometimes be too narrow itself in its outlook. But the group, she says, has been tremendously helpful to her.