

# Giant painting to boost Arctic

By Angela Bianchi  
Special to The Star

If a picture is worth a thousand words then painter Ken Kirkby's realist Isumataq ("The Big Painting") will read like a novel.

Encompassing his 3,000 square foot Concord studio are 38 panels of blank canvas which when joined, will make one continuous scene.

After a quarter century of trying to sell the Arctic to a disinterested Canadian art-buying public, painter Ken Kirkby is determined more than ever to awaken the world to our northern culture in a very big way.

A persuasive nationalist and eager salesman, Kirkby has large-scale dreams about painting the definitive and largest Arctic portrait in the world, and he's halfway there.

"My desire has always been to paint a very large painting that gives the size of the horizon and captures the feeling of the place. I know I'll embarrass some Canadians with my portrait because I'm like a family member boasting about the family . . . but we are something. Just think: half the world wants to come here," confesses Kirkby.

What started off as a casual dinner-talk idea has turned into a labor-intensive mission for Kirkby, and a costly one at that.

He's already sunk in \$180,000 of his own and borrowed money toward his giant masterpiece painting even before laying a brush on the canvas, and expects to pour in an additional \$120,000 before his work is completed three years down the road.

## Different

But the money will have been well spent, Kirkby says, if he succeeds in melting away old stereotypes of the Canadian north and enlightening "downtown Canadians" about their better half.

"The way I see the North is radically different from the magazine photographs, and what I'm trying to do is paint it the way it actually is. The Arctic has not got anywhere near the amount of snow people think it has. It's not as cold or dangerous. It's not polar bears and little Eskimo children with puppy dogs. It's a completely different place with a very awesome powerful feeling that it evokes in people.

"However the people haven't been there to see it," says Kirkby.

Expected to measure 12 feet high by 152 feet long, the painting will be one for the record books as the largest work on canvas painted anywhere.

It is expected to give Kirkby a few logistical nightmares before it's finished, utilizing 3,952 nails, five litres of glue and more than one ton of paint.

About 20 years ago, Kirkby couldn't give away his paintings that now fetch up to \$100,000. The problem, claims Kirkby, "is that art critics can't judge something they don't understand and have never seen."

Kirkby first set foot on the northern trails 30 years ago as a temporary worker for a western firm that eventually turned into a five-year sojourn. The 19-year-old amateur explorer had finally realized his childhood dream of visiting the Arctic.

He came to understand and admire the Inuit culture through his many travels with them to the Arctic Circle and Baffin Island. Upon his return to British Colum-

bia, Kirkby became a fierce proponent of Inuit culture through his painting.

Kirkby had also become one of the first white men this century to discover and eventually paint Canada's first wonder, the Inukshuk, a stone structure that dates back 10,000 years.

Ranging in height from five to 25 feet, legend holds that the thousands of Inukshuk, cairn-like stone objects scattered across the Northwest Territories, were used by the Inuit for hunting purposes as travel markers and perhaps religious monuments.

"I had to find a subject that would personify the North and this (Inukshuk) is to me the image of North and I use it repetitively in my paintings to create an entire feeling and spark curiosity from the people," says Kirkby.

Despite the relative success of his Inukshuk paintings in Vancouver and Toronto and an impressive list of owners, Kirkby says he still needs to turn Canada's mass attention to the country's number one asset, the North.

When completed, Isumataq will provide the onlooker with a towering view of the various Arctic landscapes north of the Tundra region.

The painting, colored in burnt sienna, ultramarine blue, manganese blue and white, rises from the left with a spectacular view of the top end of Baffin Island in the region around Nanasivic, blending nicely into the next prominent scene of an awesome 12-foot Inukshuk. Further down the painting Kirkby includes landscapes similar to those found in Ellesmere Island and Boothia peninsula.

It is balanced with a mountain scene of Mount Esgarde in the Pangnirtung area taling off with a look at the rapid glaciers in the region.

"I want people to react to my painting. I hope they'll think I'm showing something no one else has shown them before, and I want to change their vision of Canada," says Kirkby, who plans to have it completed by 1991.

He then plans to dismantle and box it, then take it on a sponsored tour across Canada and to several world capitals.

He won't show in galleries, but in places where people aren't "intimidated by art," like arenas and stadiums. After the tour he will auction Isumataq, with the bidding starting at \$1 million.

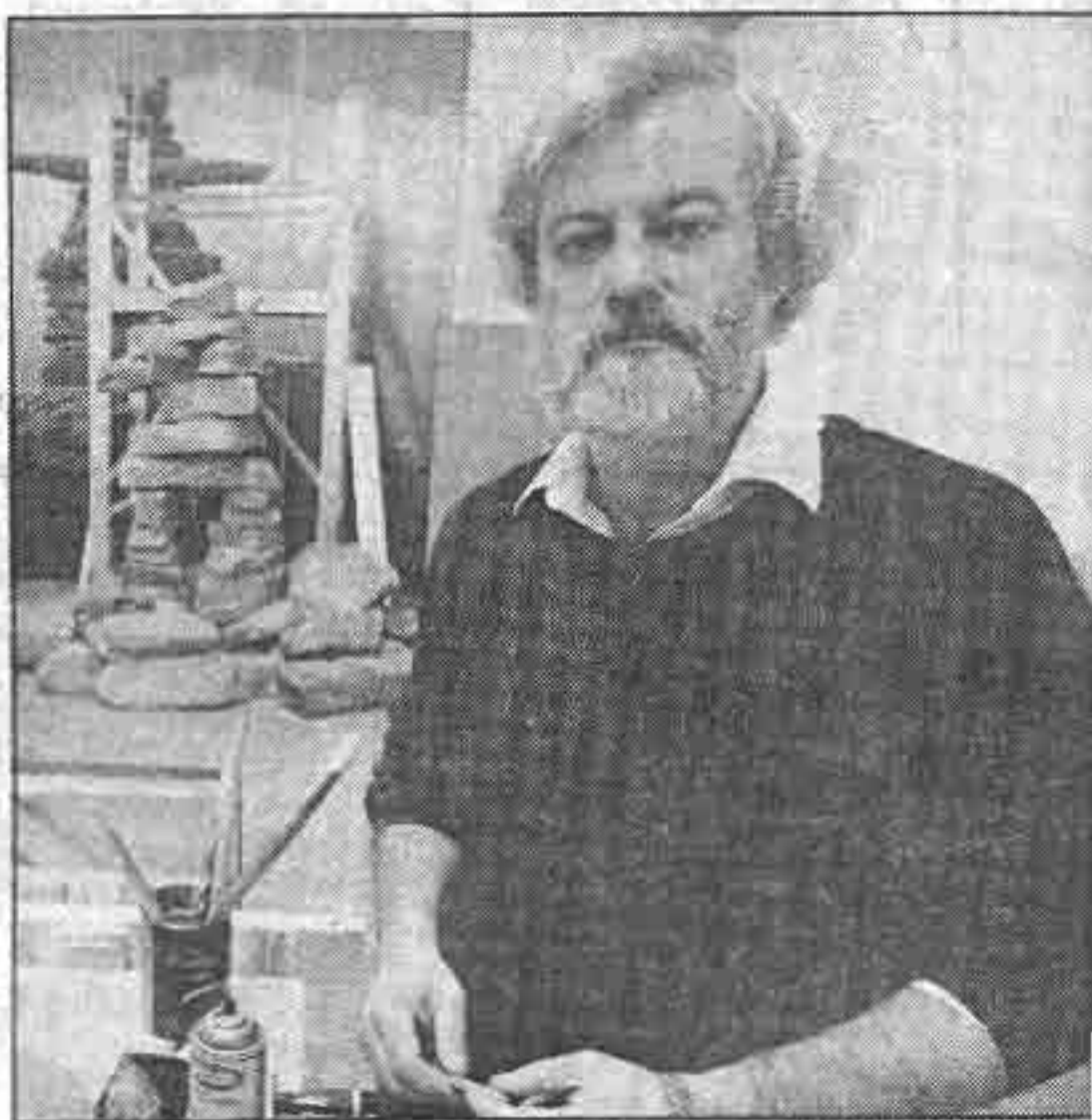
## A bigger studio

"I'll put \$50,000 in the bank and hope to open a bigger studio where young painters can apprentice in the old-fashioned way, but the majority of my money I want to invest in the North, to help my Inuit friends get better education and health services," says Kirkby.

Born in England and raised in post-war Portugal to a "crazy family" with Danish, Italian and Spanish roots, Kirkby, a dyslexic, credits his eccentric father for teaching him to be a strategic thinker and to be self-promoting.

"When I was eight I would draw all week and sell my work to my father. He'd buy my best work, then tear it up in front of me, leaving the worst drawings on the table. When I asked him why he did this he simply said 'That's how life is,' remembers Kirkby.

"My father knew very little about painting but he knew a lot about the world and he wanted me to be a realistic as far as my painting was concerned."



FRANK LENNON/TORONTO

**KEN KIRKBY: A casual idea became a mission.**