

the Shore Life

Drawing upon fantasy

Artist Charles van Sandwyk eschews modern world trappings in pursuit of his inspiration.

By TIA ABELL
Reporter

Sitting in Deep Cove artist Charles van Sandwyk's cozy living room feels like one has somehow traveled to Bag End and, that at any moment, Gandalf will knock at the door.

That's not to say van Sandwyk resembles a hobbit.

Entirely a normal size for an adult human, the 38-year-old artist nevertheless projects an Old World charm, mirrored in his 1919 cottage with its wooden beams, artful furniture and view of the wet greenery outside. Even before his front doorstep, little stone creatures peek out between potted plants.

One wouldn't expect anything else. Known for his whimsical paintings and drawings of animals and fairies, as well as his illustrated books such as *A Selection of Neighbourly Birds*, van Sandwyk seems like a fairy tale character himself.

When *The North Shore Outlook* dropped by, the cottage is filled with the homey scent of roasting goose — in preparation for a dinner with one of the artist's former art teachers. A bottle of good scotch waits (does scotch figure in fairy tales?). Bilbo would approve.

At the far end of the little house, pages from his current work in progress are spread out beneath a bright wall of windows. The Folio Society in the U.K. commissioned him to illustrate a new edition of *The Wind in the Willows*, and the



Rob Newell photo

ECCENTRIC ART — Charles van Sandwyk's latest creations are for a new U.K. edition of the *Wind in the Willows*.

talks about the characters, including Toady, who he describes as being Winston Churchill-like.

"(*The Wind in the Willows*) is a perfect vehicle for expressing old English eccentricity," the artist offers.

goods or the trappings of the contemporary world. A simple coffee maker is about the highest-tech object in sight. Asked if he has a computer, Van Sandwyk smiles and points to his old-fashioned wood fireplace

ward — a helpful friend stepped in and took dictation from him.

It's perhaps ironic that his brother is a systems analyst.

"I am ridiculed so much by my friends for this," he says with a good-natured shrug. "But you don't have to be such a lemming. We don't all have to buy a couch from

It also leads to his annual winter migration (to happen shortly after this interview) to a remote island in Fiji, where he says he is almost completely isolated. And that's exactly how he likes it.

"I don't have to have access to everything," he explains. "I would rather have access to my own brain so that I can invent something. Some of my artist friends like to be in New York and be bombarded with it all — I can't deal with that. I have to go on a mental diet to do my best creatively."

Another one of his obvious strengths: focus.

Before his family moved to Deep Cove from South Africa when he was 11 years old, van Sandwyk had already developed a fascination for the birds and animals as well as the red ochre colour of the earth surrounding his rural African home.

His parents, meanwhile, fed his imagination with Peter Pan, Grimm's Fairy Tales and Beatrix Potter, and later, as a student at Seycove secondary, he read J.R.R. Tolkien's books.

Elements of these early interests emerged in his artwork at Seycove, and although he started selling his work at around age 12, his high school art teachers tried to get him to apply his hand to other styles and subjects. But van Sandwyk kept his course.

"It was always in me from day one. Fortunately, I didn't let anyone knock it out of me," he says with a smile. "They all tried to get me to do

am job would be *The Hobbit*

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Van Sandwyk credits some of the old Dutch masters' paintings as another source of inspiration, in particular for their thematic content.

"Each tableau is specific to the human condition, it's quite formal and serious. Then I realized the world was missing some damn good fairy paintings."

He'd always admired children's author and artist Beatrix Potter's work, how she created an artistic style with the right amount of naivete and beauty without becoming overly saccharine. He also admired how Potter's stories appealed to children, yet adults could also appreciate her wit and humour.

"So I thought I would like to give my oomph in that area, in that tasteful world devoid of commercialism," he says. "I thought we needed a softer edge to art and to children's stories. So my work became sweeter, not less so."

Like Potter, he relied on animals to embody meaning.

"They are such brilliant vehicles to express human emotion. You can show a softness we'd never accept if it came from a human."

So what's next? It may be hard for some of

his fans to imagine, but van Sandwyk's thinking of applying his talents to parasites. Yes, he's talking about drawing tapeworms, head lice and other human pests. Asked if he's joking, he looks surprised at the question and pulls out another series of insects he painted — but these include graceful beetles and butterflies, creatures typically higher on anyone's cute list.

Of course, if anybody could add humour, charm and personality to a tapeworm, it's van Sandwyk.

And in his spare time he's working on drawings for his dream project: *The Hobbit*. He's sketched a wise but formally attired Gandalf, as well as a patchwork landscape for Hobbiton.

Van Sandwyk's a big fan

of the recent Lord of the Rings films, which he says gave the audience many gifts, including anticipation, stimulation and, ultimately, satisfaction.

In fact, if as rumoured director Peter Jackson decides to film *The Hobbit*, van Sandwyk would love to be a part of it. And he has some ideas on improvements.

"It needs more attention to detail, especially quaintness," he says, adding he thought that otherwise, Jackson did a great job.

"I'd buy Peter Jackson a drink any day of the week."

Or maybe the director could drop by the cottage for some roast goose, scotch and a long chat about bringing Bilbo to the big screen. ◉



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Cove artist finds inspiration in Pacific paradise

Layne Christensen

News Reporter
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LIFE is art.

It's the credo that artist Charles van Sandwyk lives by and the title of a show of his works at the Seymour Art Gallery through Dec. 7.

Life is comfortable.

In cardigan and rumpled corduroys, Van Sandwyk appears older than his 31 years as he sits in an overstuffed chair near the hearth in his Deep Cove cottage, pouring tea into Beatrice Potter cups and serving home-made cookies on his grandmother's china.

Life is rewarding.

Collectors line up in the rain to purchase his works. His framed watercolors sell for as much as \$3,900. The National Library of Canada archives his drawings and etchings. He's currently negotiating with a New York publisher to produce a fine-art book that would compile drawings from his many self-published "little books."

Life is idyllic.

The first six months of the year he there are no telephones, no electricity. His mornings are spent sketching; his afternoons fishing and working the plantation to reap food for the table.

Life is unpredictable.

In March, a cyclone ripped through his Fiji isle, blowing away his grass house and tearing the tin roof off his studio. No lives were lost but nine of his watercolors were destroyed, setting him back several weeks. He repainted them.

Life is simple.

The cyclone wiped out his banana orchard and lemon grove. It blew his outhouse up a hill. The toilet was retrieved. "I set it up and all was right with the world," says the artist.

Life is a journey.

Born in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1966, he moved to Deep Cove with his family 11 years later. (A trace of his accent remains.) Wanderlust led him to the South Pacific. A yearning for roots brought him back to Deep Cove.

Life sometimes takes us where we want to go.

He's been selling his prints since he was 14. At 16, he held his first public art show in Deep Cove at the Earth Sea Gallery, where the Seymour Art Gallery now stands.

As a child, he illustrated the scenes and characters he imagined while reading J.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. He now resides in his own "hobbit house," a 1920s cottage with creaky floorboards and a river-rock fireplace.

Life is finding a sense of place.

The home once belonged to his grandmother. Now it's filled with mementos from his travels — hurricane

See Work page 24



NEWS photo Terry Peters

A brush with paradise

Deep Cove artist Charles van Sandwyk is currently showing his works of enchantment at the Seymour Art Gallery through Dec. 7.

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Charles Noel van Sandwyk

Charles van Sandwyk was born in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1966. In 1977, he emigrated with his family to Vancouver, Canada. By the early 1980s, he was selling his drawings and watercolours in a style reminiscent of the old prints and paintings collected by his family.

The wanderlust of younger years sent him traveling to the South Pacific. He discovered the Fiji Islands which had such an impact on his life that he now spends much of this time on a remote island there.

In 1986 van Sandwyk won an Alcan award for his first limited edition book **A Selection of Neighbourly Birds**. With images printed on an 1870 Keltons Son etching press a friend had given him, this book inspired his venture into the world of handmade books and prints. His work is collected across North America, Europe and Japan, including commissions for Expo '86 in Vancouver and the Anchorage airport in Alaska.

The National Library of Canada has maintained archives on his work since 1986 and in 1992 purchased the original drawings and printings for his children's book **The Parade to Paradise**.

The book **Wee Folk** won Juror's Choice award at the 1994 Seattle Book Fair, and also third prize at the Alcuin Awards '95 for limited editions.



Charles Noel van Sandwyk

**EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLICATIONS
1982 - 1997**

1982 *Earth-Sea Gallery*, Deep Cove: one man show.

1985 *Salmagundi West*, Vancouver: one man show

1986 *Expo '86*, Vancouver: kinetic sculpture at Canada Place

1986 *Van Dusen Floral Hall*, Vancouver: group show with Watercolours West

1986 Published **A Selection of Neighbourly Birds** (edition: 126)

1987 *Salmagundi West*, Vancouver: one man show

1988 *Tigers Cafe*, Vancouver: one man show

1989 *Tigers Cafe*, Vancouver: one man show

1990 *Tigers Cafe*, Vancouver: one man show

1991 *Joyce Williams Prints*, Vancouver: one man show

1991 Published **Strange Birds** (edition: 1200)

1991 *Surrey Art Gallery*, Surrey: retrospective show in children's gallery

1992 Co-published, with Summerwild Productions,
The Parade to Paradise (edition: 5000)

1992 *National Library*, Ottawa: reception for acquisition of
The Parade to Paradise

1992 *Tigers Cafe*, Vancouver: one man show

1992 Published **Affairs of the Heart According to Birds** (edition: 20)

1993 Published **How to See Fairies** (edition: 1000)

(please turn over)

1994 Second printing: **How to See Fairies** (edition:1,000)

1994 Published **Wee Folk** (edition 40)

1995 *Tigers Cafe*, Vancouver: one man show

1995 Published **Sketches from the Dream Island of Birds** (edition 200)

1995 Published 10th anniversary edition of **Neighbourly Birds** (edition:2,000)

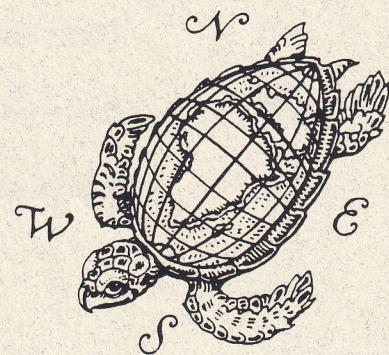
1996 *Joyce Williams Prints*, Vancouver: one man show

1996 Published **Sketches From A Tropic Isle** (edition: 1,500)

1997 *Seymour Art Gallery*, Deep Cove: one man show

1997 Published **Pocket Guide to the Little People** (edition: 2,000)

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by *Damian Inwood*

Charles van Sandwyk Finds Peace in the Eye of the Storm

The vicious cyclone tore down on the tiny Fijian island paradise, packing lethal 280 kilometre-an-hour winds. "The coconut trees were dancing around like can-can girls," says North Vancouver artist Charles van Sandwyk. "Two of my neighbour Joe's windows blew out. We went out and found them and it was like being in the middle of a blender."

"It was by far the scariest thing I've ever been in."

Sitting in van Sandwyk's cozy, Deep Cove cottage, it's hard to imagine the violent storm that flattened his grass-roofed studio last winter and soaked some of his watercolours beyond repair. Worse still, it destroyed homes and killed two people on the string of islands that the artist thinks of as home.

"It made everything seem a little more precious," he says of the day-long ordeal. The fury of the storm inspired him to paint a new series of pictures that capture the small, peaceful moments in life.

Van Sandwyk fans will get a chance to see that work at the Seymour Art Gallery in a show of 90 paintings and etchings called *Life is Art*. Three quarters of the show is new work and the rest is a retrospective look at van Sandwyk's career, with paintings from private collections. The present gallery sits in the same spot as the old Earth Sea Gallery where van Sandwyk held his first one-man show at the age of 17.

"In the new work, there's a whole theme of cherishing the moment and the time that we have," van Sandwyk says. "There's a bit of an earth series that's happening." He points to a series of paintings -- there's a stately tiger, a rhinoceros looking at a shooting star, a monkey holding a human skull, a winking owl, strutting cockerels, a leopard, and a spiny lobster. Van Sandwyk continues using animals to represent the human condition as he finds that, in painting, animals can express emotions with a charisma that the human element cannot match.

The show also offers visitors a chance to buy van Sandwyk's new book, *Pocket Guide to the Little People*. It's a subject that the 31-year-old van Sandwyk has painstakingly developed over the years. The resulting scenes of leaf-clad autumns elves and fairy lamplighters hearken back to the Victorian era of children's books.

"The fairies are all drawn from life," he says, straight-faced, after being asked where he gets his inspiration. "I get them to pose. I draw them. Who needs inspiration?"

"In order to see them in the first place, you have to be inspired from childhood. All this stuff is really designed for my appreciation, which is for other grown-ups who like to remember what it was like to be children."

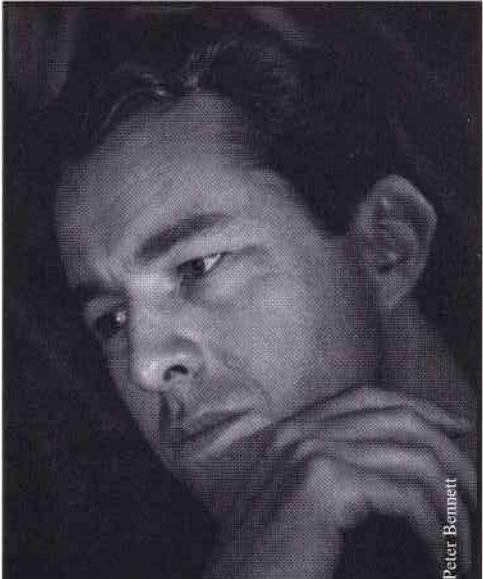
Van Sandwyk's whimsical approach to art goes back to the days when he first started selling his work as a teenager growing up in Deep Cove. "Painting has been my passion from day one," he says. "I did some drawing for *The Hobbit* because I loved that book when I was 14."

He fell in love with J.R.R. Tolkien's world, painting scenes of Hobbiton, Bilbo Baggins, Frodo, and Gandalf. "I developed my love for painting because there were no pictures of those guys," he says. Van Sandwyk still has some of the original watercolours and, even though they're artistically naive, you can still see the emerging skill of a young hand.

In fact, says van Sandwyk, he'd love to illustrate *The Hobbit*, for the book's 60th anniversary next year. "For many years, and even to this day, I wanted that to be my next big project, to illustrate that," he says.

A visit to his Deep Cove cottage is like stepping back in time to a gentler age. In many ways, van Sandwyk's home is a metaphor for the art he produces. With its hardwood floors and river rock fireplace, it is full of solid, well-made furniture, Tiffany lamps, and old rugs.

On the walls are van Sandwyk's paint-



Charles van Sandwyk

Peter Bennett



Owl, Charles van Sandwyk

the studio roof was ripped off, and water came into the building, but it didn't collapse."

There was three hours of mayhem and then 90 minutes in the calm of

the eye of the hurricane. "Then it comes back, like a jet engine, and you're flat on your back, like being in a cake mixer."

When the cyclone hit, van Sandwyk had completed nine watercolours for his new show. Although they were largely reduced to pulp, the water's effect on one, called *Passage to Paradise*, pleased van Sandwyk. It's a watercolour showing a sailboat heading towards a multi-coloured horizon, signifying man's soul going to paradise. A lion, representing earthly courage left behind, looks on. The torrential rain damage gave the sky a rainbow wash which van Sandwyk has reproduced in the new version of

the painting, which is in the new show.

It fits in perfectly somehow. It allows van Sandwyk to include the frightening experience of the storm in a way that does nothing to unsettle the gentleness of his philosophy and artistic vision. ☺

Charles van Sandwyk's show, Life is Art, runs from November 6 to December 7 at the Seymour Art Gallery. Please phone 924-1378 for more information.

Damian Inwood works as a journalist for The Province.

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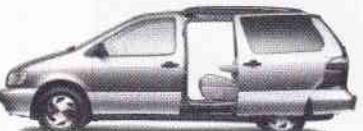
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