

AN EXHIBIT AND WEBSITE celebrates the work of Frédéric Back and his use of it to champion and protect the environment



PHOTOS: IAN BARRETT THE GAZETTE

Frédéric Back on his art: "When you're involved in important causes and are fighting for beauty, you can never do enough beautiful work, because it is the quality of your work that enhances the message."

Sowing the seeds of activist art

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THE GAZETTE

In a world where what you've won sometimes defines you more than what you've done, artist, filmmaker and environmental activist Frédéric Back is best known for his three Oscar nominations - and two wins for *Crac!* in 1982 and *L'Homme qui plantait des arbres* in 1988.

What many might not know is that this gentle man who lives in a modest duplex in Côte des Neiges has created a body of work that reaches beyond his films to embrace book illustrations, posters, paintings, stained-glass design (the window in the Place des Arts metro station), special effects, set design, interior design and restoration work.

An exhibit of his works opens at Espace Création Loto-Québec today. A website dedicated to his life and art also launches today at www.fredericback.com (the French-language site is up now, the English version on April 18).

Since he began sketching country scenes while studying at École de Beaux-arts de Rennes in the early '40s, Back's preoccupa-



Back with a frame from the Oscar-winning *L'Homme qui plantait des arbres* at his studio on Tuesday.



tion has been with the world's flora and fauna. He has always hoped his art would inspire others to love and protect the planet.

Also toward that end, he has worked with the likes of the Société québécoise pour la défense des animaux, Société internationale d'arboriculture and So-

ciété pour vaincre la pollution, the latter of which he co-founded.

Along the way his talent has garnered him international awards and numerous honours.

"I suppose one always wishes to have more talent," Back said recently. "When you're involved in important causes and are fight-



ing for beauty, you can never do enough beautiful work, because it is the quality of your work that enhances the message."

Back was seated at a table in his second-floor atelier, amid sketches, paintings and a jumble of awards and trophies. (The Oscars are at Radio-Canada.)

This is where the 83-year-old spent the last two years sifting through endless boxes of drawings and documents with daughter Suzel Back-Drapeau, Nathalie Simard (no relation to singer René Simard) and archivist Luc Dagenais.

They decided designing a website was a better idea than an expensive coffee-table book.

"(My father) immediately demonstrated the same enthusiasm for the website as he did for television when he first started working (in the fledgling medium in the 1950s)," Back-Drapeau said. Back started on Radio-Canada television productions in the '50s, joining its animation department in 1968.

Back did the animation in Jean-Yves Landry's production *The Firebird*, which won a Prague d'Or and an Emmy in 1980.

Back-Drapeau and brothers Christian (an entomologist) and Francis (an illustrator) grew up knowing their dad was an artist, but only when she dug into his thousands of drawings did she realize the breadth of his work.

"The website is more like a virtual museum," she said. "It has

400 pages. A big website usually runs around 80 pages."

Some limited-edition prints will be sold via the website.

Back continues to draw, but his focus now is on family. His wife of 58 years, Ghylaine Paquin-Back, suffered a stroke three months ago and has been in the hospital ever since. Back visits her every day.

"In 1948, I came to Canada for a one-month visit and then I met Ghylaine," he said. "She changed my destiny. She is my critic and my confidant. I accomplished what I did because of her."

Frédéric Back, l'oeuvre et les gestes is at Espace Création Loto-Québec, 500 Sherbrooke St. W., until Aug. 5. Call 514-499-7111, ext. 2829 or go to www.loto-quebec.com.

More at: montrealgazette.com

BACK IMAGES: To see galleries of Frédéric Back's work and learn more about the artist, go to Editor's Picks on our website.