



Early Start, acrylic, 15 x 30"

Nature Bonds Father and Son

BY FRAN HOWARD

Eric Bjorlin remembers with delight the boyhood days he spent with his father enjoying nature, but it is with a sense of urgency that he remembers the times his entire family took part in Earth Day cleanups. "We filled trailers and dumpsters with trash from roadside ditches and streambeds," Bjorlin says. "It was a sobering experience that more of today's youth should be exposed to."

Today, Bjorlin is passing on to his own sons his father's love and respect for the environment and a knack for using nature as a way to create indestructible bonds with people. He is also using those values to take his art to a new and higher level. "Eric's passion for his subjects is reflected in his work," says wildlife artist Daniel Smith, a former co-worker and mentor of Bjorlin's. "His use of light creates a unique authenticity that makes you feel like you are there."

Bjorlin lost his father, Roger, to Alzheimer's disease a little more than a year ago. An outdoor enthusiast and longtime commercial artist, Roger Bjorlin once tried to steer his son away



Eric Bjorlin and his sons examine a tree gnawed by beavers in the forests of northern Minnesota. From left are Tom, 8, Ben, 5, and Andrew, 8.



Late Departure, acrylic, 46 x 28"

"During this time, I created fine art paintings on the side, but I stopped illustrating in 2002 to focus solely on fine art," Bjorlin says. Standing almost 6½ feet tall, the artist looks more suited to work as a lumberjack, yet because of the foundation he built at Studio West, he can infuse life into the rapid wing beat of a tiny hummingbird, or portray the elusive bond a father and son share with nature.

Most of Bjorlin's works have a family connection, including *Late Departure*, which features a late migrating bald eagle traversing Lake Superior's frozen shore. While on his honeymoon in December 1995, the young husband researched the landscape for this stunning piece. "It was bitterly cold," Bjorlin recalls, and the lake spray was nearly freezing on contact with the granite outcroppings. The following year Bjorlin set to work on the painting. The terrain and colors were ideal for the fierce yet adaptable bald eagle. "I used glazes to build up the translucency of the ice," he notes. "By watering down the acrylics they became translucent washes." He then softened the ice using an airbrush.

Dad and I Series

An eagle can also be seen off in the distance in *Early Start*, one of what will eventually become four paintings, called the Dad and I Series, that capture both the artist's concern for the environment and the father-son bond. The death of Bjorlin's father infused new meaning into the artist's work. "It was so hard to watch my dad fading. At the end, I couldn't even have a conversation with him. I couldn't sleep at night. The Dad and I Series is therapy," he adds. "It reminds me of all the good times I spent with my dad hunting, fishing and walking in the woods. Now I'm passing on my dad's loves to his grandchildren." Each of Bjorlin's sons is depicted in one of the three completed paintings in the series. Five-year-old Ben is the boy in *Early Start*.

Bjorlin says the eagle taking flight at dawn in *Early Start* is a reminder that natural resources, just like passions and values, are passed among generations. "The eagle is a symbol of what we can do if we put our minds to it," the artist notes. "They've come back, but now water is an issue. Are we going to pass on clean or dirty water to our kids? Fish that we can or cannot consume? Our society is too busy thinking only of now. We must slow down, look at our children, and think ahead. Will we pass on a high quality of life to future generations? We need to expand our notion of value beyond money and appreciate the value of nature."

Some of Bjorlin's fondest memories are of the days he spent hiking and fishing with his father. "My dad would stop and point out the tiny plants, the mosses,

from studying art because he knew the challenges that lay ahead. Instead, Roger's love of nature, artistic talent, and fatherly companionship had a profound impact on Bjorlin's decision to become a wildlife artist. Today, Bjorlin splits his time between his art and caring for his three young sons (when his wife is at work) at their home in Plymouth, Minn.


Family Ties

Before becoming a wildlife artist, Bjorlin, 43, worked as an illustrator for 15 years at Studio West, a Minneapolis design firm owned by his father and the accomplished illustrator John Keely. It was at Studio West that Bjorlin perfected a myriad of techniques and styles, including woodcuts, cartoons, abstracts, watercolors, acrylics and pastels, and it was here that he met wildlife artists Darrell Bush and Daniel Smith, who also worked at the company.

the mushrooms," says Bjorlin, who is carrying on the tradition with his own sons, all amateur entomologists. "We fish a lot. We go grouse hunting, but it's really more like a walk in the woods. We look at a tree that a buck deer rubbed against, the bark of a tree chewed on by a beaver."

Contented days are also portrayed in one of Bjorlin's early woodcuts, *Summer Hummer*. Woodcuts can be a lighthearted technique, a faultless match for the subject matter in *Summer Hummer*. The piece is printed from two wood blocks, one for the whimsical, billowing clouds in the background and one for the much richer colors of the crimson-red delphiniums and ruby throat of the hummingbird. While *Summer Hummer* is a limited edition of 30, each print is an original. Once the blocks are printed, Bjorlin adds the watercolors.

A graduate of the College of Visual Arts in St. Paul, Minn., Bjorlin became interested in woodcuts while working at his father's company. "I was imitating woodcuts for illustrations, when it occurred to me I could learn the art, so I enrolled in night courses at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design," he says. "Woodcuts work well with natural scenes. They impart a rough-hewn charm to a work. I love it when you can see the wood grain in the piece. It's like Mother Nature adding her own spice. I can't achieve the same thing with a tube of acrylic."

Bjorlin also could not have achieved the depth and poignancy of his art had it not been for the friendship and mentoring he received from his father. 

Fran Howard is a freelance writer living in St. Paul, Minn.

Images courtesy of the artist.



Summer Hummer, woodcut with watercolor, 13½ x 12"



Traditions of the Hunt, acrylic, 24 x 18"

CONSERVATION CONNECTION

In July 2004, Eric Bjorlin created a limited edition of 450 signed prints to be used as a fund-raiser for Whitetails Unlimited. From the sale of the prints, the national conservation organization raised \$45,000 for the preservation of habitat. The painting, *Traditions of the Hunt*, is one of great sentimental value to the artist because it depicts the tree where he and his father, who died from Alzheimer's disease, would build a campfire when hunting together. "My dad had a hard time finding the tree on our last hunting trip," says the artist.

Bjorlin The "Dad and I" Series



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