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Journalist [Russell Bowers]: Coming up on the program this week; Michael Markowsky. He's had his paintings exhibited all over the world, and now he wants his work shown *out* of this world. In fifteen years he's gone from being a CBC intern to an internationally renowned visual artist. His paintings are described as 'avant-garde' and they've been shown in galleries in New York, Montreal, Baghdad and his home province of Alberta. This year he was commissioned by the *Calgary Stampede* to make new work for the 'Western Showcase' and broaden the idea of what 'Western Art' can be. And now he's been named Canada's new 'War Artist' by the *Department of National Defense*. Michael Markowsky even wants his work to leave this planet altogether! I caught up with Michael Markowsky outside the *Calgary Stampede* to talk about the type of paintings he did for the *Stampede*, and his future plans. Michael Markowsky, how are you?

Michael Markowsky: I'm doing great! I'm doing great! How are you!

Journalist: I'm not doing too bad. You told me before coming over here to meet you that you said that my stuff is going to be over by the wine tasting area, but you can't miss it. Fair to say abstract, right?

Michael Markowsky: Yes, semi-abstract. There are figures and animals in landscapes (but they are painted in a non-traditional way). What I did is that I went down to the Cross family ranch [near Claresholm, Alberta] and I shot a whole bunch of video and then I went back to my studio and played the raw footage through the TV, and I made sketches while watching the moving images on the television. So the drawings quickly became kind of abstract. For instance, the figures are out of proportion. I also used my imagination to amplify the colors from the video, to make them brighter. In those ways, they are very different than a lot of the other paintings on display here at the *Stampede*, because other artists may be taking photographs and then trying to reproduce the photographs.

Journalist: You like to work in those fleeting moments and take what you can from it, right?

Michael Markowsky: Yes, but it didn't occur to me until all these new paintings were up how they related to the previous work I've done in the past, which is doing things such as being strapped to the roof of a car and driven through the desert at 100km an hour and trying at the same time to make an oil painting of the landscape! But I realized that after talking a to a few people and having the paintings up on the walls that there *is* a similarity of approaches, because like as I was saying, I was drawing while watching the television, so I was still able to capture that same kind of movement, just in a different

way. Instead of being out there, moving through the landscape, I'm moving through it through the television.

Journalist: There is a contrast there, when you hear that description though, because there is that fleetingness of the moving image, and then there is the permanence of an abstract painting, or a painting in general. I mean, how do those two reconcile for you?

Michael Markowsky: That's a great question; there is something that is almost absurd and impossible about trying to capture the world that we live in on a flat surface with paint. But at the same time, it's an attractive challenge. And even those artists who paint in a completely different style than my own, who paint representationally, I imagine they are thinking about that same thing; 'how do I capture this world around me and what instances am I going to capture?' My approach is to try and capture multiple instances simultaneously, as opposed to one still moment like a camera would. I want to try to capture not just one moment, but also a period of time. I would hope that in the future people would be able to experience that in the same way but also kind of bringing the cutter that painting is living in twenty years from now.

Journalist: I know you are from Calgary, but how connected did you feel to this subject matter before you started making work for the *Stampede*?

Michael Markowsky: Well, this was something that kind of came in from out of left field! I wasn't expecting it, but I'm always up for different challenges, and something unique. Having grown up in Calgary, I never spent any time south of the city, maybe only to drive straight down to the [U.S.] boarder. So I was really surprised at the kind of landscape that exists, just west of the highway. I mean they put the highway there for a reason, because it is flat and straight, but just west of it you have these huge, deep valleys, and giant lakes and forests and swampy atmospheres, and that just blew my mind. And so I was really surprised to have grown up twenty years of my life here and then go just an hour south of the city and realize there is a whole area that I've never experienced before! Being down there and having that experience with the Cross family and visiting with people that I don't ordinarily spend time with, you know, cowboys and ranch hands, that's actually really transformed the way I even think about the *Stampede* now. I'll totally admit to being extremely cynical about the *Stampede* before I had this opportunity, I mean, you would have had to drag me down to the *Stampede* before, and now I see it in a completely different way. I mean, I just saw the *Stampede* as this thing that was plopped down, right into the middle of the city and it had no connection to the landscape or the people. I've since realized that there are people who live the cowboy/ranching lifestyle 365 days a year. They surround the city, and they descend upon it and they bring that culture with them to Calgary.

Journalist: There is another environment that you are going to be stepping into pretty soon; you are off to Afghanistan in November. Tell us about your role as a 'War Artist'.

Michael Markowsky: Well, that is something that I feel incredibly fortunate to have the

opportunity to do. You know, no matter how you feel about the war in Afghanistan, the fact is that we have men and women out there who are putting their lives on the line, so just to be able to go out there and to document that experience, I think they deserve that, at the very least to have their experience documented and preserved, because some of the paintings I make will go into the *War Museum* collection afterwards.

Journalist: How do you think your technique will serve you in a place like that where I imagine things can move pretty fast?

Michael Markowsky: Yeah! Well that's going to be the challenge. My work is very different that the kind of work that both the *Stampede* has traditionally shown and as well as the work that is usually commissioned from 'War Artists'. I'm surprised that they invited somebody like me to participate, and I think it shows that they are open minded and willing to see their experience through a completely different set of eyes. And like you said, I do work on the fly, and so it's just another challenge for me to see how I'm going to adapt that kind of environment, and circumstances.

Journalist: Do you have any sense of where you will go or what sort of scenarios you'll wind up being exposed to?

Michael Markowsky: It all happens through the *Canada Council for the Arts*, so I sent in an application saying what I really wanted to do was to fly around in jet aircraft and make sketches while we are flying. And they accepted me! So then I called them up and said 'you know in the letter, where I said that I wanted to fly around in planes and make drawings, you read that part right?' [Laughs] And they said 'Yup! We know exactly what you want to do...'

Journalist: Everybody knows the *Canada Council* has a direct line to the Department of National Defense. [Laughs] Will you be creating while you are there, or will you be taking images back with you?

Michael Markowsky: I probably will be doing most of the work back in my studio. I'll bring as much material as I can out there, but I imagine that most of the time I'll be participating in different in activities, looking at things. So I'm just going to bring all my tools with me and then however the time I'm out there unfolds, I'll embrace it.

Journalist: Any sense when those works will be on display for the public?

Michael Markowsky: That is a good question. Probably sometime in 2011, I would imagine maybe summer or fall of 2011.

Journalist: Now with all success that you've had, you're not one to keep your feet on the ground, shall we say. You have some loftier goals. You were telling me something about the moon...

Michael Markowsky: Well, my long-term objective is to stand on the surface of the moon and to make a painting, and this is a goal that I plan on achieving by January 1st 2030. It all started off as a joke, but the more I started thinking about it, the more I started to realize that it's not absurd at all. Eventually, we're going to have artists out in space, on the moon and on mars, and whether that is 10 years from now or a 100 years from now, the fact is that it *will* happen. We've already sent kindergarten teachers, doctors and scientists out there, so I think it's only right that we send artists out there, at some point anyway. So putting that out there as a goal and just kind of getting people's mind's thinking about it is the first step.

Journalist: How do you get paint to work in zero gravity?

Michael Markowsky: Well that is something I want to investigate! [Laughs] ...I'll have to do some experiments.

Journalist: Here's my suggestion, here's how I think you make this happen: first of all you hope that Prime Minister [Stephen] Harper is around for a little while, because he's got the same hair as [John F.] Kennedy, right [Laughs]. So this is it, you want to see him standing up in Parliament, going 'It's our goal to land safely an artist on the moon, and return him safely to earth.' That's the speech you want to hear! [Laughs]

Michael Markowsky: I would love to hear Harper say that! That would make my day! That would be quite the speech!

Journalist: Maybe a moon landing would get him interested in the arts, who knows!

Michael Markowsky: Well, if that's what it takes! [Laughs]

Journalist: We'll get him playing piano in the space shuttle, and you up there painting on the moon, it'll be fantastic! We'll good luck with that!

Michael Markowsky: Thank you very much! I'll let you know how it all goes!

Journalist: Michael Markowsky is Canada's new 'War Artist' and he'll be going to Afghanistan in November. His remaining work commissioned by the *Calgary Stampede* is on display at *Axis Art Gallery* in *Art Central* in Calgary.