

BY JON VARA



Using a variety of tools—some standard, others improvised—drywall contractor Bernie Mitchell works magic with mud.

Mud Michelangelo

Any highly skilled drywall taper is an artist of sorts, but Bernie Mitchell is an artist by any standard. An Ennismore, Ontario, drywall contractor, Mitchell has spent the past 20 years developing and refining a method of creating remarkably lifelike relief sculptures in drywall mud, many of which ornament the walls of area vacation homes.

The blank canvas for one of Mitchell's creations is an expanse of standard drywall that's been taped and given a couple of coats of primer. For the sculpted figures, he uses a customized mix consisting of standard drywall mud that's first thinned with water, then firmed up with dry setting compound. There's no hard-and-fast recipe, but the goal is a mud that's wet enough to stick when slapped onto a wall but stiff enough to resist sagging as a thick mass. The admixture of setting compound prevents shrinkage and cracking during drying.

Mitchell does a surprising amount of the tooling with a standard 4-inch drywall knife, switching to narrower knives as needed. His favorite tool for curved sur-

faces is the back of an ordinary tablespoon. Finer details are added using a sharp-bladed leather-working tool. He finds that dry brushes are useful for introducing surface texture, and sometimes resorts to improvised materials where a specific effect is called for. To get the fur on the figure of a wolf to look just right, for example, he recently dragged a crumpled piece of plastic bag over an area of still-soft mud.

Mitchell doesn't paint his finished sculptures, in part because paint would blur or obliterate fine detail. More to the point, he says, his work is about texture, light, and shadow—not color. "The key is to work on a wall where the light comes in at an angle," he says. "When you're done, you have something that's always responding to the light moving across it. I never get tired watching it change throughout the day."

To see a video of Bernie Mitchell in action, visit his YouTube page.

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Photos: Bernie Mitchell