

AGB exhibit makes history

By Sherwood Hines

A small bit of local history was made last Friday night at the Art Gallery of Bancroft (AGB), with the packed opening of Finding Critical Mass, the first AGB exhibition dedicated entirely to the art and culture of the Algonquin First Nations people.

It has taken 35 years for the AGB, and 139 years for the Town of Bancroft, to recognize and begin to understand that there were a people here with their own arts and culture long before the first United Loyalists arrived.

Three hundred years of European rule, disease, and genocide all but eliminated the original Algonquin people of this region. Those that have survived live in a few scattered communities, or have been blown to the wind; the Algonquin Diaspora now stretches from British Columbia to Europe.

It was tremendously difficult, noted Critical Mass curator Robin Tinney, to find artists within the remaining 10 Algonquin communities who produced art and who would trust me enough to allow their work to be shown. History has given them absolutely no reason to trust outsiders.

For much of the 20th century Aboriginal artists have been derogatorily labeled in the art community as primitive, simplistic, or only interested in myth. Many in our community have internalized this view, and have not tried to present their work to the larger world, notes Tinney.

So how do you get people to again believe in their art? Through a lot of conversations, says Tinney. It took hundreds of emails and numerous visits to people's homes to convince some of the artists we could put on an exhibition.

A community drumming circle, led by Aida Tinney, opened the evening ceremonies, and was followed by an Algonquin traditional smudging ceremony. A prayer was recited over sweetgrass by Aimee Bailey, Heritage Planner with the Algonquins of Ontario, after which AGB President Barbara Allport, and Bancroft's Deputy Major Paul Jenkins gave their welcoming remarks.

First time cultural events that come with historical significance are about much more than art. FCM, as both Allport and Jenkins noted, is about acknowledging our history, understanding what happened to the first peoples who lived here, and through that acknowledgement honouring their existence and discussing where we go next.

Jenkins, who was instrumental in guiding Bancroft council to financially support the exhibition, spoke of Bancroft's need to truly believe in the history and heritage of the Algonquin people. It's time, especially with the current treaty negotiations, and the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to make Algonquins part of our community, said Jenkins.

It is also why the town is supporting the creation of an Algonquin interpretive walking trail for the Eagle's Nest park, as well as the current Algonquin canoe making exhibit happening at Millennium Park, notes Jenkins.

FCM was conceived when Robin discovered he could not find a single carver to teach him traditional Algonquin stone carving. I started looking at databases, the Museum of Civilization, the Museum of History, Google. I couldn't find any Algonquin artists. I realized that a whole group of artists had disappeared. Which, for me, was a metaphor for the government's entire approach to dealing with Algonquins. Ignore them long enough and they will die away.

For Tinney, FCM is about choosing to share our histories, our secrets and our resources. It is about choosing to trust and to grow. It is about working hard to have a cultural future. I'm very happy that the Art Gallery of Bancroft, the Town of Bancroft, and the Algonquins of Ontario have been supporters of the show from the beginning.

For former AGB president David Ferguson and current president Barb Allport opening night was the end product of 16 months

work. "Many Canadians are becoming aware of the Aboriginal roots in their communities," notes Allport, "and it's good for us to experience this culture. To raise our awareness."

Not surprisingly, the 16 featured artists cover a range of artistic approaches, from Dawson Welsh's paintings of rural living, Melinda Shank-Miles' beautiful acrylic Sky Woman and her Thunderbirds, Rhonda Woods' wood block paintings, to Michelle Mackenzie's photography that captures the colour, intensity, and the intimacy of pow-wow dancing.

Painter Lin Smith's "Jennifer" deftly captures the spirit and precociousness of being a bright three-year-old Algonquin girl. Within the tiny painting, Smith captures the very best possibilities of the little girl's future.

Aida Tinney's "Raven Mask" made of stained glass is as good as any mask this writer recently viewed at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver.

An exhibition dedicated entirely to Algonquin art was a long time coming to the AGB, and it is a small start to future possibilities. "What I would love to see," concluded Tinney, "is that five years from now these artists are brought back, so we can see how much they have grown, and how many new Algonquin artists step forward because of this experience."

FCM runs through Sept. 3.