

Artist draws inspiration from Canadian Arctic



By Nate Smelle

The gallery space at the Hastings Highlands Public Library got a little cooler last week once local artist Linda Lang's paintings went up on the walls. The exhibit is inspired by the artists' many journeys through the arctic, and features a collection of oil paintings of melting glaciers, polar bears and mountainscapes.

On Thursday, June 19 Lang officially opened the exhibition, taking the time to walk the audience in attendance through the timeline of her paintings. She started by describing the awe-inspiring nature of her first journey to the Arctic back in 2002 when she visited the region with her mentor, the artist Doris McCarthy. She started keeping a timeline of her art work and her travels to help document the rapidly changing Arctic climate and landscape that she had fallen in love with.

?In my paintings I try to tell the stories but it is a bit of a dilemma because as an artist I want to sell my paintings and make money,? said Lang.

?If you tell too many sad stories people probably won't want to buy your paintings. Once you experience climate change firsthand you know you need to share these experiences.?

She has been back to the Arctic now 13 times since that first visit. The impact of climate change on the Arctic landscape becomes more apparent every time she returns to the far north, Lang says. Through her art she hopes to raise awareness of what these changes mean for the quality of life for the resident people and wildlife who call the north home.

In 2007 Lang travelled back to Auyuittuq National Park (The Land that Never Melts) in Nunavut with 65 high school students from across the country to act as an art instructor on the journey.

?I had amazing resource people, Inuit guides, Inuit Elders, a third of the students were Inuit so they wanted to share their culture and their experiences with you,? she said.

?You go out on the land and you explore the land with the Inuit. I couldn't think of a better way to learn about the people than to explore the land with the people.?

The experience of travelling with so many enthusiastic youth ready to change the world motivated her to paint. An experience that

usually provides her with great joy inspired her to put down her paintbrushes instead. Travelling into a location she had visited near Pangnirtung where she had visited a few years earlier she was excited to re-explore the semi-familiar terrain. This time when she arrived back to The Land That Never Melts she was in disbelief with what she saw. Much of the land that was covered in snow and ice only three years prior were now green and growing with vegetation. Asking the Inuit artists and Elders accompanying them she did not like the answer she received.

?The one Inuit artist said to me that the snow and ice I had seen a few years earlier had been there for as long as his people could remember until it all melted over the last five years,? Lang said.

?It was the first time in my life that I couldn't paint. It was also the first time I had ever wiped a painting clean. I didn't even leave it half finished. It was funny because they say as artists we paint our emotions and it was so grey and so dark that it was the only time in my life that I wiped a painting clean.?

Lang said she went back aboard the ship and looked down the fjord and she was flabbergasted with how much snow and ice had disappeared in only the last three years.

On another of her expeditions a couple of years later Lang found herself roaming the shores and the mountains of the Torngat Mountain range in Northern Labrador. On this trek the guides would head ashore first to scout for polar bears before the rest of the crew arrived. Without ever seeing a polar bear at this location ever before, this time the scouts missed one.

Feeling safe due to her southern position and the scouts report Lang separated herself from the group to explore some of the seabird cliffs nearby. She ended up with a little more than she bargained for when she found herself watching a polar bear below on the mountain. Polar bears have never been observed this far south in the Torngats before. The rapidly melting sea ice where these apex predators hunt for seal are become more unstable and dangerous for both wildlife and the Inuit people.

As depressing as the facts may be, Lang says she will always go back to the Arctic to do her part as an artist to help protect it. Last year Lang was part of the exhibit Artists for Conservation with Robert Bateman in Vancouver.

?The easy thing to do would be to not be an artist, and just get a day job,? she said.

?Once you see what is happening you can't turn your back on these people and the environment.?

Lang has a busy year ahead. Not only will her work be on display in the gallery space at the HHPL throughout June, she will also be featured on the 2014 Bancroft and area Studio Tour this fall. During the tour some of her paintings will be on show at the Art Gallery of Bancroft (AGB). This September Lang is organizing a fine arts exhibit in the gym at the Hastings Highlands complex as part of the 25th annual Maynooth Madness festivities. In February of 2015 Lang's Arctic-inspired art will return to the walls of the AGB in her own exhibition.

For more information on her work visit www.lindalang.ca.