

Truth art exhibition opens at the Art Gallery of Bancroft



By Bill Kilpatrick

On Sept. 5 the first half of the Truth and Reconciliation art exhibit entitled Truth opened at the Art Gallery of Bancroft. The opening reception on Sept. 7 was attended by over 200 patrons who were lined up across Flint Avenue as they waited for a chance to view the exhibit. Truth is the first of two art exhibits that features artwork by Indigenous artists drawn from the surrounding 10 Algonquin communities and runs from Sept. 5 to Sept. 30. The show was co-curated by Algonquin artists Robin Tinney and Rocky Green. The second half of the show entitled Reconciliation and will feature artwork by non-Indigenous artists. It opens Oct. 3 and runs until Oct. 28 with the opening reception on Oct. 5 beginning at 7:30 p.m.

Tinney said that one of the hardest things he had to do to put this exhibit together was to reach out to the 10 Algonquin communities and try to get connected with some of their artists, since the communities rarely interact with one another. Once he was able to make

contact with artists from those communities he outlined his parameters for the show which, for him, was a focus on the messaging and content over the artist's skill level. He told the artists "If you can provide a good message [regardless of your skill level] I'm fine," said Tinney.

The driving force behind the exhibit, according to Tinney, was not only to bring attention to the Truth and Reconciliation findings, but to "graphically show Canadians some of the truths that Indigenous people live with every day." Tinney expressed his frustration that despite some minor changes and a lot of lip-service, not enough was being done by the current federal government to implement the 94 calls to action. So Tinney decided to put together a grass-roots effort through art to bring attention to Indigenous people's experiences in the hopes that it would create some pressure from below. "I want to get Canadian's attention," said Tinney, "but I don't want to brutalize them [with explicit pieces of artwork]."

The artists, if they so desired, could give descriptions of their pieces along with write ups based on their interpretation of Truth and Reconciliation. One artist, Melinda Shank, who produced two pieces for the exhibit entitled "Time Immemorial" and "Intersection" wrote about truth stating that, "Fear continues to disrupt the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people," adding that, "We need to lean into the future together, to challenge fear and demand truth. We can use this knowledge to empower ourselves and each other and change this world for the better. Reconciliation involves truth, actionable change and restitution. There will be many years ahead of us yet, to determine what that will look like and we've only just begun."

As an artist himself Green points out that the difficulty of creating pieces for an exhibit such as Truth is that it breaches the line between art and politics, "You have to answer some questions and do some [personal] work and exploration [and] for people who are usually non-political as artists [this can be difficult]."

One such artist who would agree with Green was Diane Hannah who created two pieces entitled Generational Trauma and Sacred Balance. In her description Hannah calls Generational Trauma, "the darkest piece of artwork I have ever created."

The artwork is a plaster cast of a pregnant girl who was raped, who has cigarette burns, scars, broken ribs, red handprints across her face and neck and she is holding a braid of her hair in her hand. There are messages that are written on birchbark placed all over her body that represent the threats, violence, and abusive language that was common to hear in residential schools such as, "Speak English or I will stick this needle in your tongue," and "Dirty Stupid squaw," among others. The piece of artwork is so powerful that, according to Tinney, two people had to leave the gallery during the opening reception after viewing it.

"When Robin approached me about doing the Truth and Reconciliation show I wanted to dig a little deeper into my emotions and create a piece that was a little on the darker side that was going to invoke emotions from people who were viewing it," said Hannah. What made the creation of that piece of art so difficult, according to Hannah, was that the silhouette she used for the plaster was of her own daughter carrying her grandchild. "When I was working on the piece and thinking of all the trauma that had happened to this young girl who was in a residential school, who was raped by the priest and all of the awful things that she had to go through, I was imagining that happening to my daughter and it really took me to some dark places."

Hannah had to take many breaks due to the emotional toll that the piece was taking on her. "It was definitely a different experience for me to tell a darker story as that is not usually my nature." Hannah said that her motivation for creating the piece was the stories that she had heard from her friends who were involved in the sixties scoop and others who went to residential schools. Hannah said that because of the strong emotions that were involved in its creation she was quite happy to have it leave her home for the art gallery.

All the pieces in the show are not meant to invoke negative emotions explained Tinney. One of the other pieces that was included in the show was an electronic picture frame that contained numerous pictures of Algonquin people's families and friends having positive interactions, laughing and showing kindness to each other. This, says Tinney, was meant to show the positive side of the truth. "These are things that we often don't think about when we think about truth," said Tinney, adding that, "In spite of it all we still have community."

The Truth exhibit already broke records for attendance during the opening reception according to art gallery members and there has been an increase in daily viewings as well. Tinney says that he believes that people were, "blown away by the honesty of the show?" and Green added that he believed that people were "relieved" that it opened opportunities for civil conversation about truth and reconciliation. Due to the show's success Tinney and Green want to take the Truth and Reconciliation art show on-the-road and tour around Canada. Tinney says that ideally he would like to take a few pieces from the first two shows with them, but then have other local Indigenous artists create their own regional pieces that represent their local perspective. According to Tinney there have already been other cities such as Peterborough and the Leamington Arts Centre that have expressed an interest in hosting the art exhibition. "The nice part is that it's fully adaptable and if it works here it could work anywhere," says Tinney, but more importantly for Tinney and Green, is that the art begins to work a change in the Canadian consciousness, that so far, in their view, has fallen short of recognizing truth and implementing reconciliation.