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Colourful exhibition highlights contemporary Aboriginal issues at Cultural Centre

May 21, 2014 · 0 Comments



By Brock Weir

The day before the RCMP released their report on missing and murdered Aboriginal women, Native artists expressed their pain and healing through their work in Aurora.

It was the opening of Indiginesse, a landmark exhibition for the Centre curated by Newmarket artist Nathalie Bertin to highlight “Perspectives from Contemporary Native Women.”

Bringing together the voices of Aboriginal artists from coast to coast, it is meant to be a “catalyst for conversation” between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities about modern day challenges, both unique and shared.

“The first question I am usually asked about Indiginesse is what inspired me to create this project,” Ms. Bertin told a packed crowd gathered in the Aurora Cultural Centre’s Meridian Gallery. “My first answer is always I wanted to know who my peers are. As a Metis who only found out about my

indigenous heritage late in life, I had a lot of learning to do. In doing so, I realised that a lot of Canadians simply don't know about our indigenous history and the cultures that surround us outside of old history books.

"When thinking about how I was going to develop this project, I decided to use tradition to talk about the present. I chose women artists because many First Nations traditions are matriarchal and the women were responsible for passing on much of the culture to the young ones. I chose contemporary artists who not only create aesthetically pleasing work, but who could also speak to who they are, what matters to them today and [in] the present.

Indigenesse is two years in the making. When the Idle No More protests began in the fall of 2012, led by First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples to fight for the issues that mattered to them, it drove home the point to Ms. Bertin that her vision for the exhibition was not only on the right track, but would help facilitate a discussion that was needed now more than ever.

"We need to start having discussions on indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians outside of Parliament, outside of media sound-bites so we can better create understanding for us," she concluded. "Ultimately, this exhibition isn't about me. It isn't only about the artists, either. It is about all of us coming together to learn from one another, to bridge that gap that currently exists between us, so we can move forward on life's journey together."

This vision was shared by Suzanne Smoke, who helped open the exhibition in song, accompanied by her daughter Cedar. She spoke about these common values and a shared responsibility shouldered by women, regardless of colour, to protect the earth.

"The artwork here is to create a dialogue and educate how magnificent we are as a culture, that we have a culture that is so magnificent and goes back more generations than most, we can't have any differences anymore based on our race," she said. "We are all here, we are all part of the water, and all part of one nation for Mother Earth.

"We are not protesters. We are defenders of the land and protectors of the water. Shift your paradigm way of thinking that your government has taught you about indigenous people. We are here to protect the water for each and every one of you. We are here to protect the water for the next seven generations, regardless of race, creed or colour."

Suzanne and Cedar led the audience in an extensive circle dance, one which was so large it necessitated the creation of two concentric circles to do the job.

Afterwards, taking in the crowd, and discussing their collective work with many of the people in attendance, Ms. Bertin said there weren't any words to truly encompass what she was thinking.

"What I have noticed a lot more of is a willingness for everyone to learn more about indigenous cultures and to basically find out more about themselves," said Ms. Bertin. "I hope they leave with a new understanding and maybe more questions than when they walked in the door. Asking questions is a good thing, when they are genuine and sincere. Maybe having some of their perceptions challenged. Those are things I am hoping they take away with them."

Indigenesse runs through June 28. For more information, visit www.auroraculturalcentre.ca



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