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Native women share perspectives in landmark exhibition

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By Brock Weir

As a Metis woman, Nathalie Bertin didn't discover her Aboriginal heritage until she was in her mid-20s.

In Ontario and Quebec, she says, assimilation happened much earlier than it did in Western Canada and there are many families who might not even know they have native blood. This was not the case with Ms. Bertin.

Her parents knew of their heritage but, with three children growing up in Toronto, they were reluctant to say anything due to negative images of Canada's Aboriginal peoples which were pervasive at the time. But, eventually, their heritage came to light.

"A light goes on and you understand certain things in life," says Ms. Bertin of discovering her roots as an adult. "Quite frankly, I feel ripped off about it and I feel like I have spent the last 20 years catching up because there is so much to learn. There is a lot of beauty in the culture."

This is a beauty the Newmarket-based artist has tried to share through her work and this week, her vision, three years in the making, will be unveiled at the Aurora Cultural Centre in *Indiginesse: Perspectives from Contemporary Native Women*.

Hailed by the Aurora Cultural Centre as one of the primary cornerstones of their 2014 season, the exhibition formally opened for viewing on Wednesday, with the official opening reception scheduled for Thursday, May 15.

Indigenesse brings together the art – and the messages – of Aboriginal and Metis women from coast to coast in work ranging from painting, to sculpture, to textiles.

The initial kernels of the idea were first sown for Ms. Bertin at her own shows where she found herself “explaining Native people to non-Native Canadians” more times than she cared to remember. The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to seek ways to facilitate a true dialogue about what contemporary Native people are all about.

“Yes, they do pay taxes, but let’s get beyond that!” she says with a laugh, noting perceptions can often stem from sound bites and inaccurate history books.

“I have always believed that artists are the ones who accurately record history and I started to get to know my own peers and who my own peers were. Yes, I am speaking from my point of view, but there are artists from across Canada who come from different communities.”

Metis from Ontario, she elaborates, are quite different from the Metis of Manitoba. The Ojibwa from the east are very different compared to the residents of Haida Gwaii. Through the process, Ms. Bertin was able to learn more about her peers and her contemporaries.

“I decided to concentrate mostly on women because of the whole aspect of the missing and murdered women from across the country, which is finally starting to get some attention,” she says. “Historically, from the First Nations’ perspective, women are always the ones who were the storytellers and the keepers of the knowledge. They were the ones who kept the traditions of the culture alive. For those reasons, I decided to put a show together of Native women from across the country who are creating, but also have something to say. They are not just creating decorations. They have something to say about where they are coming from in today’s society.”

Artists included in the show are Kayeri Akweks, Christi Belcourt, Lee Claremont, Raven Davis, Lee Deranger, Lita Fontaine, LauraLee K. Harris, Maria Hupfield, Nadya Kwandibens, Tanya Lukin-Linklater, Shelley Niro, and Janice Toulouse.

With the artists assembled, the next task was to find a venue and the Aurora Cultural Centre were more than willing hosts. She says she has been lucky that so many women were willing to step up and participate in the show. Curating the diverse work, including painting, beadwork, and contemporary abstract forms, was not an easy task either – but the message soon became clear.

“Amazingly enough, it was the diversity that brought the show together,” says Ms. Bertin. “Everyone was coming from a different perspective and a different point of view. At some point, the show ended up being about different aspects of women’s lives and that is what ultimately ties it together. We are not just talking about the missing and murdered women, we are talking about people’s perceptions. They are all intertwined because these are all issues that face women and, in particular, Aboriginal women.

“It was also, in terms of organizing the events, finding artists who could bring up a subject matter which would also open up the discussions, artists who would be able and willing to answer questions and have that discourse so people could take away. We can’t answer all the questions throughout a show, but we can at least provide a creative forum to allow for more discussion in the future and inspire people to go out and look for more information.”

At the end of the day, for Ms. Bertin, if the show can create a dialogue, that is the measure of success. She says she wants people to come into the show with open minds, although they are braced for that all-too-familiar tax question.

“Even if those are the questions, if they are asked genuinely, it doesn’t matter what the question is so long as the question is asked.”

Indigenesse: Perspectives from Contemporary Native Women runs at the Aurora Cultural Centre from May 7 – June 28. The opening reception will take place Thursday, May 15 from 7 – 9 p.m., with guest Senator Dr. Alis Kennedy. Thursday’s opening will also include poetry and an artist talk with Raven Davis. For more information on the exhibition, including associated performances and workshops, visit www.nataliebertin.com.



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