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Open up to "Love" this weekend for Culture Days



By Brock Weir

So, you wore the dress, you threw the bouquet, and you're sitting here wearing the ring. Now what?
It's a question many brides ? and grooms, for that matter ? ask themselves once the planning is complete and the extravaganza is in the history books, but for art curator Stephanie Nicolo, some people are reluctant to go looking for the answer.
Ms. Nicolo, curator of the exhibition Agape Me at the Aurora Cultural Centre, will welcome guests this Saturday to her exhibition for a ?Walk & Talk? designed to get those questions flowing as part of Culture Days Aurora.
?We don't really talk about what comes after the whole dating, courting and the big wedding, but what comes after that/ Where do we leave ourselves? Do we still feel anxieties and maybe even some shame that comes with starting something fresh and different, such as young love?? asks Ms. Nicolo, who is still putting the finishing touches the plans for her own wedding next month. ?I really wanted to open the conversation with this show on what love looks like, what love is to you, and how religion reflects on how you love, who you love, why, and how commercialism affects it.
?Those questions are quite heavy, but in a very beautiful space we can ask ourselves through our art.?
Bringing together the work of nine artists, Agape Me is the brainchild of Ms. Nicolo and her fiancé Carlo Vinco. Their engagement in January of 2015 coincided with the Aurora Cultural Centre's coordination of the 2016 gallery season.
?The idea came to mind that I would never have an opportunity in this kind of atmosphere of preparing for my own marriage, being able to talk about love and marriage in this particular way again because then I would be married and I would be coming to it from a very different perspective,? says Ms. Nicolo.
Developing the kernel of the exhibition with Carlo starting with the development of three key questions ? What does love look like? How does Religion reflect love and marriage? How does commercialism affect love and marriage? ? she took the exhibition the rest of the way, developing themes and sourcing artists.
?Agape Me? means ?My love? in Greek, but it is also the Greek word for ?unconditional, selfless, and giving love.? In Ancient Greece, this was the ideal, says Ms. Nicolo, but today's world is often ?stuck on the ?eros' love, defined by passion and ?the one that consumes you.' This explores both sides of the coin.
Amid the paintings is a photographic exhibition called ?Interlove? by Colin Boyd Schafer, which documents the stories of interfaith couples and how they make their relationships thrive. Another piece, this time from Alexandra Martin, asks the audience to write love letters to themselves pondering some of these key questions.
?It is a question of how do we love others when we don't love ourselves,? and that is worth exploring,? says Ms. Nicolo. ?When we express our self-love, we are considered narcissistic and vain, but this is seen as an opportunity to be okay with our bodies, be okay with ourselves, and to take a moment and write that out. To show that you do care that you are expressing this love, you are asked to put the letter in a clear box so the love is literally growing in the galleries.?
Through the development of the exhibition, those main three questions were explored but, as a consequence, many off-shot questions rose to the top that have yet to be answered, she said, including queer, same-sex, and trans relationships. These questions to get touched upon, but just on the surface. There is an opportunity, she says, to delve deeper.
?Research shows a lot of confusion, and confusion leads to anger and anger leads to hate, and that is the opposite of what we are

trying to do with the show, and that is to open our doors, be more inclusive, and be more loving and open,? says Ms. Nicolo. ?This is an exhibition where you can come back [to look at it] with different thoughts, come solo, and maybe come with the person you are with or thinking about being with. You can sit and be with the installation, read poetry and maybe write a love story of your own.? Agape Me runs through November 12.

Culture Days is this Saturday and the Cultural Centre has a number of activities planned to coincide with this exhibition including the Walk and Talk at 2.30 p.m., preceded at 1 p.m. by a conversation with participating artist Michele Pearson Clark.