

Shifted Ground explores our nature's present and distance past



By Brock Weir

You might not feel the earth move under your feet, and, let's face it, neither did Carole King, but whether you feel it or not, the earth is shifting – and it will continue to do so even after we're gone.

We're stewards of the world around us, says Rebecca Last, and one only needs to look as far as our own actions to see the impact we have on the environment.

‘All of this is changing, a lot of it because of people,’ says Ms. Last. ‘We're stewards of this land, or at least we've sort of taken this role on. If we go extinct, the world will continue. If we want to survive, it is not the planet that's going to need to survive; it's going to be us.’

Ms. Last, an award-winning artist who has exhibited around the world, explores these themes in her art exhibition entitled ‘Cassandra's Garden: Tracing Shifted Ground,’ which is now on at the Aurora Cultural Centre.

Set to formally open this Saturday, August 18, with an Artist Reception from 1 – 4 p.m. as part of Doors Open Aurora, the series of large-scale paintings is inspired by the landscape surrounding her studio on Rice Lake, near Peterborough – a landscape she describes as ‘often primordial.’

Her vivid paintings trace our complex interconnectedness with the natural world, along with our own psychological ties to landscapes that transcend generations.

‘Up until I [moved my studio to Rice Lake] I would say I was an urban gal,’ says Ms. Last. ‘The exposure to the elements, to the lake, but also to what was going on over the lake had a pretty profound impact on me, and on me artistically, and I made a right-angle turn in my artwork.’

Before she encountered Rice Lake, Ms. Last spent a lot of her artistic time in Europe studying and teaching. There, she was inspired by the umbers and ochres of the Italian landscape, but focusing more on Canada, she found renewed inspiration in the often cooler colours that typify the Canadian terrain.

‘I do really believe, down to a cellular level we're connected to the air around us and to each other,’ says Ms. Last, adding she was inspired to delve deeper into the changing landscape of Rice Lake and the surrounding areas through the renowned writings of Catherine Parr-Traill, who was an early settler in the area. ‘Then, there is the distant past too because Rice Lake is based on drumlins, these little islands that were formed by glaciers retreating during the ice age scratching the surface. I went up with a friend in a plane above the lake – and you could see everything is parallel. There was a connection to the far past landscapes in front of us too, as well as the near past.’

Looking into the much nearer past and the present, Ms. Last says she is struck by the images of Earth beamed back to the planet since the start of the space race, images which bring home even closer our interconnectedness.

‘We're very connected to our solar system and all the accidents that got us here,’ she says. ‘I think when you look at a two-dimensional image, whether it is my painting, a photograph, or someone else's artwork, one brings to that their own experiences of the natural world. I know from my own experience, looking at images of mountains meant something very different to me before

I actually saw mountains [myself]. I hope when people look at my work, they bring their own experiences of nature to it, and that it reminds them of the value of it. That is something really, really critical right now.

?I also hope when people look at this, it triggers memories of positive and moving things because everyone I know has some sort of primal connection to some place they have been that is natural and remind them that we're all vulnerable, our planet is vulnerable, and just be moved and inspired to enjoy our natural world.?

Shifted Ground runs at the Aurora Cultural Centre August 11 through September 29.

Artist Talks with Ms. Last are scheduled for August 15 and August 19, each evening from 6 ? 7.30 p.m.