

## Graduates tap into emotions for Celebration of Youth Arts



**By Brock Weir**

From the contemplative nature of a walk in the forest, to dependence on technology, to grappling with the sensation of feeling just slightly out of place in the world around you, upcoming high school graduates are tackling complex human experiences and putting emotions into their work as they prepare to take over the Aurora Cultural Centre next month.

While the majority of high school students spent the winter break getting some R&R, graduating art students were hard at work completing their final projects, which will form the basis of the 2019 Mayor's Celebration of Youth Arts, which runs February 2 ? March 2.

‘I think this is an amazing opportunity and it encourages you to do more,’ says student Laaya Tabei, who is working on a two-piece series on canvas exploring the idea of displacement. ‘The fact there is going to be an audience encourages me to do more with my art and for it to have a message.’

This is a feeling shared by student Chris Barnett, who says ‘the main purpose of art is really to convey something that you really find important to other people.’

‘I find that local galleries such as this are really good for students in getting us exposure,’ he says of the chance that will be, for many participating students, their very first chance to exhibit in a professional gallery. ‘My portfolio wasn’t originally supposed to be forests, but it ended up turning out to be that way! It was meant to be really just a collection of pieces about architecture and the things that resolve around it, but I like painting landscapes as well, so I will be bringing a collection of birch forests and regular forests; I really tried to convey the peace and quiet of being in those landscapes, but also the melancholic loneliness that it can convey as well.’

As much as technology can connect people around the world, it can conversely bring about that melancholic loneliness as well. These are themes Matthew Lam will be exploring as well.

His work looks at a futuristic world, telling a story about a man trying to find his place in a ‘different world.’

‘Essentially, this man will complete many tasks, but will fail to do so,’ Lam explains. ‘In a futuristic society where technology is very advanced, he will try to replicate his body parts with robotic body parts when he fails at something so, in the end, he will be completely transformed into a robot, completely losing his humanity. Even as technology is continually advancing, it will continue taking away from us.’

It can also help and hurt when it comes to mental health, a focus for Moira-Kelly Steeves.

‘My portfolio is all about mental illness, living with mental illness and the things you can do about it,’ she says. ‘A piece I am hoping to set up here is a wearable sculpture of clothes and outfits. One of them is really outgoing and ‘out there’ and shows personality, and one is more laid-back and emotionless. It shows who I am when I am around people and who I am when I am just by myself. One of my pieces shows how people love to shove solutions at people with mental illness, like, ‘You just need to take a deep breath!’ but mostly it is just about how a person experiences life in general when they have mental illness.’

These are just the threads that the Aurora Cultural Centre’s Stephanie Nicolo relishes as she helps students prepare for the exhibition. ‘Every year these students excite me with the stories they want to tell and they inspire me with how much they really do consider their themes,’ she says. ‘It just gives me such energy working with the students. When I visit their studios to get the project

initiated, I get a sense of where they want to take their work and I can see so much potential and that just energizes me throughout the year. When it comes to the actual exhibition, they are so in-depth, and they don't even realise they really put up a mirror to their own high school community but also a mirror to the larger community, one that is so honest that it allows us to really stop and learn more about where the next generation really wants to take our future.?

Mayor Tom Mrakas, whose office is continuing the tradition started by Mayor Geoff Dawe last year in sponsoring by providing sponsorship to this exhibition, alongside returning sponsor Geranium Homes, is also looking forward to seeing the art and themes the students are preparing for the community.

?It is an excellent way to promote the arts within our community and it is a great way to show off the extraordinary talents of our youth within our community and what they have to provide moving forward in with arts and culture,? says Mayor Mrakas. ?I am looking forward to seeing the creativity they bring. Each year is different and each year there is something unique about the artworks that come forward. I am looking forward to seeing what that uniqueness is going to bring and that creativity.?

Adds Suzanne Haines, Executive Director of the Aurora Cultural Centre: ?It is pretty amazing that the students have this opportunity to come together, not just within their own schools but with other schools and present that creativity and what they have been working on through their whole high school career.?

The Mayor's Celebration of Youth Arts opens at the Aurora Cultural Centre February 2. A reception for Visual Artists will take place at the venue on Wednesday, February 6, from 6 ? 8 p.m., and a performance arts night will take place Friday, February 8 at 7 p.m., also at the Cultural Centre.