

Artists tap into 'Memory?' for SOYRA show



By Brock Weir

They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but images can also help preserve and spur memories.

A painting of an Italian streetscape might be the trigger of a long-forgotten family story. The photo of a beach could bring on a wave of reminiscences a favourite holiday. A quick sketch of a favourite dish could open the floodgates to smells and tastes that stuck with you ? and stuck to your ribs ? for decades.

For Linda Welch, President of the Society of York Region Artists (SOYRA), it is a dark and mysterious photograph of a weather-beaten rock off the coast of Newfoundland that stirs the soul and is one of her contributions to 'From Memory?' a juried exhibition of works from SOYRA members now on at the Aurora Cultural Centre through January 26.

This year, the Aurora Cultural Centre invited all SOYRA members to participate in an inaugural juried exhibition built around a theme: memory.

'Our memories are a collection of stored information, sensations and feelings, created from communal stories and fleeting memories,' says curator Stephanie Nicolo. 'They nurture our traditions, inform daily functions and provide context for our lives. Memories establish where we've been, who we are, and guide us to who we may become.'

Ms. Welch's photograph does exactly that.

'I lost a friend and I made a card of that image for his wife,' Ms. Welch explains. 'Other than it being a nice picture with a lovely colour, it meant nothing, but it was the story I put inside. The rock is very ancient. It was unique and unlike anything else on that beach in colour or pattern; the tides come in and out every twelve hours, there are storms, it tumbles and tumbles, there's wear and tear, but the rock stays. It doesn't wear away. I felt that spoke to her husband and how he was unique yet survived. He was caught up in a world with lots of wearing and tearing on him, yet his memory will survive.'

Building an exhibition around a specific theme is something relatively new for SOYRA. They built their 2017 exhibition around the broad theme of 'Canada?' to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Confederation. The idea of 'memory?' was a 'thought-provoking?' concept for members, says Ms. Welch, one that allowed SOYRA to 'add another layer to their professional shows because it challenged members with a singular focus. But, for some, that challenge proved more than, well, challenging.

'Not all members chose to be part of this inaugural exhibition because some just couldn't grasp the concept, but others thought it through and finally said, 'I'm getting some ideas,' says Ms. Welch, noting that each participant had to not only submit a work, but also complete a statement to go with each piece explaining their work, rather than a simple artists' statement.

'The subject matter has turned out to be incredibly varied, so it will be the story that goes along with the image. Our artists could paint, take photographs and do all the production steps, but for some of them, it was really tricky to put into words what made that such a special memory. We worked with our members on both production and their memories.'

'From Memory?' has been in the works since last March, adds Ms. Nicolo.

'Once the curatorial statement was finessed about what From Memory is about, the steps of how to jury came forward,' says Ms.

Nicolo. ?That was provided to the organization through the executive committee and anyone who had joined SOYRA were eligible to submit. What was asked for submissions were two images, two different pieces of work, any medium. There is consideration of what the artist is saying with their statement. It is a little bit different than the artists' statement because it is about the work specifically and how it reflects upon the theme of From Memory. Those pieces are all in consideration when it comes to the jury process.?

To underscore this concept, she points to the vivid wall in the Red Gallery which bears a painting of a simple strawberry shortcake and another of a cook comfortably placed in a kitchen, each of which has the potential to spark deep sensory memories. Elsewhere, there will be a wall looking at the memories of loss, and memories that evoke joy, friendship and growth.

?I hope there is at least one picture in the exhibition that, for visitors, will speak to a memory of their own and that will create a response,? says Ms. Nicolo. ?That is really what I, as a curator, always try to aim for, that there is some sort of response from the audience, that it creates something new for them, and that could be a memory. For this particular exhibition, it will be interesting to see what other memories come forward. Does the strawberry shortcake painting bring people into the smells and the joys of maybe a July 1 barbeque? Does it bring sad memories because somebody in their family was the only one who created the best strawberry shortcake and nobody could repeat it? Each painting and each photo and piece in this show I hope at least connects with somebody and brings forward something really special for them.?

From Memory, on now, officially launches this Saturday, January 12, with an Opening Reception at the Centre (22 Church Street) from 1 ? 4 p.m. Remarks and awards will be presented around 1.45 p.m. Free admission and light refreshments will be offered. All are welcome. For more, visit auroraculturalcentre.ca/events/frommemory.