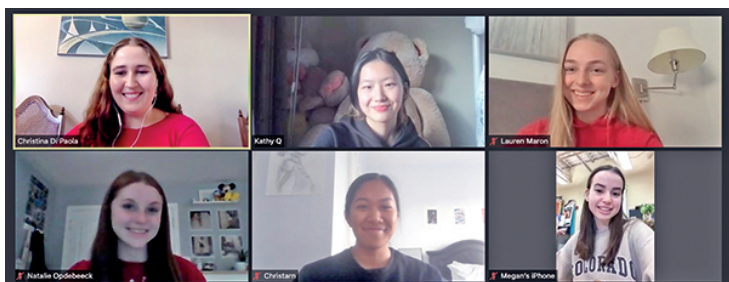


## Celebration of Youth Arts to showcase grads' views of world and themselves



Kathy Qu, like so many of us, saw her world shrink at the outset of COVID-19.

A student at Aurora High School, she took her work home with her, including her beloved art supplies, and once she was firmly in place at home, she continued to find her creative outlet even if her world was largely confined to the four corners of her bedroom.

‘Everything was composed in my room while everything was going on outside,’ says Kathy of her art installation ‘My Life in a Box.’

My Life in a Box is just one of more than 60 paintings, sculptures, drawings, and examples of digital art produced by Grade 12 students in local high schools which will form the basis of the annual Mayor's Celebration of Youth Arts, hosted between February 9 and March 21 by the Aurora Cultural Centre.

Slated to roll out to the community virtually through the Aurora Cultural Centre's website and, it is hoped, by appointment at the Centre's temporary gallery space at Town Hall, it's a yearly event that produces evocative pieces that never fail to spark community discussion.

‘We are super-excited about this exhibition,’ says Christina DiPaola, Gallery Assistant for the Aurora Cultural Centre. ‘Teachers have been paramount in helping us do the Celebration this year because it is just not possible to do any kind of in-school visits. They have been great because they see the young adults in class and we're really not able to do the program without the support of the schools. Their support hasn't wavered and it is still as great as ever.’

‘Like last year, we will be doing an online portion where the entire show will be on our website and we will be doing a 360 Virtual Tour, high-res photos, and it is to be determined how the in-person viewing of the exhibition will be, but fingers crossed we will be able to have in-person viewings by appointment.’

For participating art graduates, the Mayor's Celebration of Youth Arts is a welcome and much-needed creative outlet.

‘It creates a pathway for others to get to know you through your art piece and it is a really great opportunity,’ says Kathy.

Fellow artist Christarn Thorg of St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School is also taking a personal approach to what she hopes to exhibit at the Celebration. It's a self-portrait of her face surrounded by foliage and flowers but she is depicted crying tears of blood.

‘It represents a dark period in my life where nobody knew what was going on,’ she says. ‘The flowers resemble how I presented myself to everyone. They only saw what I presented, but they didn't see what was going on. I think this is something viewers will be able to relate to. When they initially look at it, I want them to feel uncomfortable and confused. It is confusing looking at flowers and seeing a crying face, especially if it is blood and not actual tears, but I want them to walk away reflecting on themselves, how they feel, and how they present themselves to others and really question that.’

Aurora High School's Lauren Maron is also putting herself in her work. A lover of dance, she has created a six-foot-tall charcoal piece inspired by the graceful movements perfected by performers.

"Dancers rely on their bodies to be able to do what they do, so I wanted to showcase someone who looks like me," she explains. "It's from the back, she has muscles, and I thought the black and white really captured the beauty of the body and what it can do for you."

Also taking inspiration from the world of dance is Aurora High School's Natalie Opdebeeck who, although she hasn't quite decided what to submit for the show, is leaning towards four drawings of dancer Judith Jamison.

"I was so inspired by her," says Natalie. "I am really excited to be a part of this because my sister [participated in the Mayor's Celebration of Youth Arts] a few years ago and I am excited to have the same opportunity. To have this opportunity is really awesome."

This enthusiasm is shared by fellow student Megan Brown who has taken a still-life approach to the show, creating a realistic pencil-crayon drawing of several varieties of fruit and, moving towards the margin of the piece, the realistic fruit shifts into pixels.

"I am excited to not only have my art shown in a gallery but to see other people's art and what they created," she says. "It is all the same Grade 12 course, but there is so much freedom in what you can do and I think it will be really cool to see the art of others."

Ms. DiPaola and the Cultural Centre team are also looking forward to seeing the works of the students. Each year, very prominent themes emerge on the gallery walls, from the environment to mental health, all of which provides plenty of food for thought for viewers.

"In my class, I have noticed a pattern that almost every piece is related to their mental health," says Christarn. "I think especially during the pandemic, we have been thinking about ourselves and what we have been able to put into our art. We want to share with everyone how we're feeling through our art and I hope they get that message."

"And even your grandma across the ocean can see it!" adds Ms. DiPaola of one of the silver linings of hosting a show during the pandemic: the ability to go virtual. "I know Cardinal Carter students have some digital pieces they will be doing, so we can actually show them as they are supposed to be presented. We wouldn't be able to do that in the gallery so much. There are some benefits to having this hybrid model where some of the digital photography can really be presented as best as possible digitally."

**By Brock Weir** Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter