

INSIDE AURORA: Sketch-y Weekend

By Scott Johnston

I'm invigorated, yet exhausted.

This happens every two years after I have attended the Association of Canadian Cartoonists' convention.

For three days earlier this month, I spent time with about 30 editorial cartoonists, scholars (really), and related folks, attending seminars and other activities of interest, and talking shop.

Although mainly from Canada, we had several Americans join us, as well as an ex-pat now living in Ireland.

You may wonder what cartoonists would discuss at a convention. No, we weren't having insightful discourses on the merits of 2H vs HB pencils, getting tips on how to deal with Lou Grant-type editors, or learning the best way to draw Justin's Trudeau's hair.

In fact, we had much deeper subject matter to catch up on.

The Curator of Paintings, Prints and Drawings at the McCord Museum in Montreal, told us the challenges, and eventual success, of repatriating from the U.S. several hundred historic editorial cartoons and sketches by noted Canadian cartoonist Duncan Macpherson.

This was followed by a pictorial history of political cartooning in Quebec.

We had a couple of presentations on press and cartoon freedoms and rights issues around the world. It's shocking how many cartoonists remain in jail around the world for their work, or have been placed on no-fly lists. We were told that only 14 per cent of the world's population live in areas where cartoonists can freely draw without the risk of imprisonment or other repercussions.

There was a heartening update on Atena Farghadani, an Iranian cartoonist who had just been released from jail following worldwide pressure in response to her 12 year prison sentence. She had received this for one cartoon she had drawn that unfavourably depicted that country's parliament as animals.

Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonists Ann Telnaes and Jack Ohman discussed the U.S. election and the climate of intolerance for political satire.

Ms. Telnaes, who received many threats of violence for a recent election cartoon, touched on the advantages and risks of social media in the world of cartooning.

Mr. Ohman presented a very moving film that he had narrated and presented in a series of cartoons, depicting his relationship with, and the death of, his late father.

On a lighter note, we watched as American painter Philip Burke, who is best known for his vivid and exaggerated caricatures that appear in such publications as Rolling Stone, did a live painting of ACC president Wes Tyrell over 4 hours on a five foot high canvas. That he did it in a licensed establishment was an added bonus for those of us watching.

Apart from appreciating the finished painting, we were all seriously impressed by the amount of stretching he did before he started. None of us had ever considered that before cartooning!

We wrapped up the weekend by recognizing two of the country's cartooning greats, Andy Donato and Terry ?Aislin? Mosher, who have each been drawing for their publications for 50 years ? a milestone I'll be reaching in 34 years.

These are just a few of the items that were part of the 14 plus hour days. In between activities it was great to reconnect with old friends and make new ones. And of course, I got in as many plugs about our Town and The Auroran as I could.

Cartooning is a bit of a solitary activity, so the ability to chat with colleagues who regularly share the same experiences of blank pages, looming deadlines, the challenges of transcribing a thought into an amusing visual, and receiving sometimes irate feedback - or worse yet, no feedback at all - was invaluable.

So, while I may need to do my own research on the pros and cons of different types of pencils, I am at least now suitably mentally re-energized to see me through to the next convention in 2018.

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