

Art Heals challenges viewer to see the world through new eyes



By Brock Weir

People spend so much time thinking, 'If only I had more time, I would?' and, according to Shannon Leigh Phair, they invariably have a list of things to fill in that blank. But, what if the real question was what you would do if you had less time? That is the question Ms. Phair started weighing when, in February of 2014, she was diagnosed with colon cancer aged just 32. Still fighting the fight, the Beeton resident says she has always known deep down she is an artist at heart, but her diagnoses gave her the opportunity to explore deeper that side of herself, a side which had taken a back seat to her nine-to-five job. The results of this exploration form part of the Art Heals exhibition now on at the Aurora Cultural Centre featuring artists from York, Durham and Simcoe Regions whose works are the end result of their healing process. Curated by Clare Bolton of the Aurora Cultural Centre, the Art Cures project is spearheaded by Allan O'Marra who saw several instances of the healing power of art while working with Mental Health Sciences in Whitby.

'In 2015, I conceived the idea of asking fellow artists to create works of art with emotional healing in mind,' said Mr. O'Marra in a statement. 'The premise of the show was for each artist to create a work of art that, in its creation, deals with, and hopefully helps in the healing process of personal issues such as past discrimination issues, marital or family problems, past-life issues, serious disappointments, and so on.'

Ms. Phair, who attended high school at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School with her now-husband, didn't have far to look for inspiration. Her creation, 'Mixed Feelings' is a series of mixed media blocks bearing various thoughts that came to the artists' mind in the earlier stages of her cancer fight.

'My genes made a deal with my life to have a crystal clear perspective at the highest cost,' she says of the dialogue she has with herself through these blocks. 'In some strange way I feel lucky to have been diagnosed with a terrible disease because it has given me the gift of perspective. The perspective we have in life can make all the difference. Maybe I am naïve or too positive, but this is what keeps me going.'

'My feelings have changed a lot over the past three years. I do whatever I want when I want with who I want. I become picky about who I spend my time with. I hear people say, 'If I had more time I would' and fill in the blank, but it seems that no matter how much time we have we still don't do the things that we want: learn to play the guitar, meditate, see the people you love more, spend more time looking into the eyes of the person you love. Maybe what we should be saying is, 'If I had less time I would do all of those things and more.''

Each lovingly crafted block is stitched together with thread, symbolic in Ms. Fair's eyes as it represents traditional materials, 'women's work', the craft movement, and, in the motion of weaving in and out, the art of meditation.

'It is a contemplative way of working, but it is a soft material, so it is peaceful,' she muses. 'The text on the blocks are thoughts that

came into my mind pretty much unedited. They were statements or questions pertaining to my struggle and the healing process and I think people can relate to them.?

She glances down on the floor to one particular block bearing the word ?Alone??.

?The funning thing is there was more to that statement, but I forgot it due to one of the side effects, so it stayed as ?alone' and it worked really well because that is how you feel sometimes dealing with difficult struggles. But here, I am just trying to create [for the art lover] a different way of seeing things.?

Art Heals runs through May 6.