

Artist wants to take past wrongs and create 'something where people see the truth'

Living in a refugee camp, 13-year-old Narîn Ezîdî Îsmâil had few ways to express herself.

Born in Iraqi Kurdistan, she and her Yazidi family fled Saddam Hussein's dictatorship at the height of the Gulf War in 1990. They hid in the mountains for weeks to survive until Turkey opened their borders to refugees, where they stayed in a camp for three years.

Now a successful York Region artist, the roots of her artistic passion can be traced back to this tumultuous time in her life.

'I was 13 and at that time we had no access to education, or to anything, so a lot of my days I would create art through rocks, stacking them together, collecting sticks and anything that was in front of me was art to me. I brought it here and I wanted to express it in such an interesting way. For me, it's all about creating art, not war. Going through that trauma, that kept me.'

Art remains an important means for expression and next month the Aurora Public Library's Colleen Abbott gallery will play host to an exhibition of her work.

It's an exhibition the Aurora Public Library (APL) planned to host before the global pandemic shut the world down, but now that the show is back on track, with recent events in the middle east, the message of Îsmâil is timelier and more immediate than ever before.

'I met Narîn before we got locked down and [her paintings represented] history, it was passion, it was truth,' says Reccia Mandelcorn, APL's Manager of Community Collaboration. 'Hers was one of the first if not the first Yazidi family to come to Canada and her politics, her hope, her compassion were all evident in these bright, colourful, storytelling images.'

'Then, COVID hit and I had to delay all the exhibits that were scheduled. During that time, she wrote back and as all artists, they develop their work more and more. She said, 'I have a whole new body of work I want to show.' I would have been happy with Exhibit 1, I am happy with Exhibit 2, and I am looking forward to seeing whatever else she creates because she is just an amazing artist and person.'

Îsmâil says 'Exhibition 2' is particularly important to her, she says, and is 'all about the storytelling.'

'Everybody needs to read and understand what is happening,' she says of the journey of the Yazidis. 'I wanted to be the voice behind the work and have people understand how this came to life. For me, it is all about correcting the wrong. In my work, I have tried to connect and bring everything from the wrong and try to bring it into an artwork. This collection has much to say. It is not racism, it is not against anyone, I am only against terrorism - those people who have done terrible things and right now we're talking about what Israel is going through. This is another story and I am working on another painting especially towards that, because the world needs to wake up to terrorism. There is no beauty to it.'

Regarding the Israel-Hamas War, Îsmâil says people are 'now taking a very serious glance at what is happening to innocent people.'

'Hamas is a terrorist organization and I stand with the Israelis on this because Hamas is just a name,' she says. 'If you go back a little bit, nine years ago it was ISIS. The same flag, the same belief. All of these are still connected and tomorrow it is going to be a completely different name.'

At the end of the day, she just wants people to come together and take in the work.

'I am the soul of the work, but if the work is not done, who is going to do it?' she asks. 'It's for people who are standing up for what's right, for what is right in everyone. We're talking about Indigenous rights, Black Lives Matter, animal rights, the Putin war right now in Ukraine, Israel, Yazidis - there is so much to cover and I have tried to cover that. During my time working on these paintings, I kept saying, 'Okay, I have a mission and my mission is to create' and I won't stop because I want Canada to do

something for this. I don't want to die and have people say, 'Okay, this is just the work she has left behind.'

Adds Mandelcorn: 'She can be very, very dark and a negative experience can push you into a dark place, but all of her work is bright and, to me, it shows a hope for the future. It's not giving up, it's telling a story. It's asking people to think and it is looking towards building a better world. I think if people come in and they see that message in that work, because it is what I see, then that would be a really good thing and it is an honour for us to be part of that experience.'

By Brock Weir
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