

Artists of all ages show their Pride through art ahead of Festival



Local artists of all ages have pooled their time and talents to showcase community inclusivity and individual identity ahead of the second annual Aurora Pride Festival.

On Thursday, the Aurora Cultural Centre celebrated the launch of a new exhibit, *Within & Between: An Exhibition for Pride*. Running through August 2, the show features work from local queer artists Serena Chagas, Jo Gomes, Rory Hope Gouthro, Kevin McBean, Parker McIntyre, Molly Steels, Rohjin Taebi, Natalie Rhys Turpin, as well as Ashlyn Gregory, the Aurora Cultural Centre's interim Gallery Manager.

Conceived to coincide with the second-annual Aurora Pride Festival, a collaboration between the Aurora Community Band, Borealis Big Band, and the Town of Aurora, it invited artists to showcase work that underscored their varied interpretations of Pride and the result is a diverse celebration of inclusivity and acceptance, but also serious meditations on identity.

"I'm so honoured to be a part of this exhibit," says Gomes. "My photography submission reflects my basic understanding of what Pride means to me. It's around visibility, quiet courage to exist authentically. The themes I have are pieces of belonging, being seen, and living pride with every step forward. My Pride is both a personal journey and a collective experience for me. It's not just a celebration, but also the courage to live authentically. I've been out for 40 years, so visibility has been a journey for me, and one of my photos is called *Stepping Into Pride*, which is basically talking about continuous journey, not a single moment. It's more about an act of stepping forward and, again, moving into your authentic self, and that's fluid and changes over time."

McBean, who jokes that he just might be the eldest of the participating artists, looked at Pride through a historic lens, depicting the history of Stonewall, often cited as the first protest that led to the Pride movement, as well as more contemporary movements, including Drag Queen Story Hours.

Among the younger artists is 13-year-old Gouthro who said many facets of being queer can be hard to express but art makes expression that much easier.

"The piece I created represents dysphoria transgender people feel around their body" which is something I think a lot of younger queer people experience," said Gouthro. "I wanted to get that out to show that even though it's really hard and it's really not a fun experience to go through, there's definitely a great way to find a safe space in a community. I have gone from dysphoria every day constantly to being very proud of my identity and who I am, and that meant a lot to me."

Also looking at this facet of the queer experience is McIntyre.

Gender dysphoria often features in McIntyre's work, but the wall-dominating piece they submitted illustrates the feeling of how fulfilling being trans can actually be and how unique of an experience it is.

Fulfilment is also a theme for Taebi who says the theme of love is explored through acrylics and oils.

This exhibition was conceived by Samantha Jones, our previous curator who is now on maternity leave, and it perfectly aligns with the upcoming Aurora Pride Festival at the end of the month, but it is also an opportunity for queer artists in York Region to get to show their work and celebrate the amazing arts community we have, says Gregory. This has been a really fun exhibition to curate and, as a queer curator, it was sort of a dream come true to be able to work with all these artists and I think the show is fantastic.

I wanted this exhibition to show just the breadth and depth of the queer experience, how different it is for everybody, and I think we have a really great cross-section of the community here. So often you see narratives about how difficult it can be and that's very true, but there's also so much joy and happiness to be found within the queer community and within queer relationships and just being a queer person in general.

I want people to walk away from this exhibition and think, Wow, being queer is a joyous thing, it's a complex thing, and it's difficult for everybody. We have some that are very happy narratives, some a little more sombre, a little more introspective.

These are sentiments shared by many of the participating artists.

I just hope people think, Wow, I'm surrounded by so much creativity, says Taebi. I hope they become more curious. I hope they look around York Region and a bit more and be like, Wow, there's so much more diversity than I was expecting.

Adds McIntyre: I just hope people see there is so much joy within the community. It's not just the really dark stuff that gets covered because that's easy to talk about. I hope that younger queer people see that the community is a lot more visible in their immediate area.

This visibility is an essential component, noted Gomes, a college educator, agreeing with McIntyre.

It helps educate, connect, and empower others, says Gomes. I do hope this exhibition does that for others who may feel scared to come out because there's a lot of scary parts to that, right?

Adds Gouthro: The main thing I really want people to step away from, not just with my art, but the entire gallery is that it's a very complex identity, but it's also such a happy thing. I wanted to really emphasize the point that even in hard times, there's definitely light in this community and there is light at the end of that tunnel.

Within & Between: An Exhibition for Pride is on at the Aurora Cultural Centre's Great Hall Gallery through August 2. The Aurora Pride Festival will take place in the adjoining Aurora Town Square on Sunday, May 31, from 1 to 5 p.m. The celebration begins with an opening ceremony at 1.15 p.m., followed at 2 p.m. by a performance from the Borealis Big Band, from 3 to 4 p.m. with Pride-themed games and activities, before concluding with a performance from the Aurora Community Band.

For more information, visit aurora.ca/whatson.

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