

Call to Action offers ?a human experience?

By Brock Weir

Amid the heated rhetoric and unprecedented antics of the most recent American presidential campaign, Canadian artist Joanna McEwen found a singular human moment.

Watching live coverage of an event in Flint, Michigan, at which Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders were appearing side by side, she was immediately moved when a local African American gospel choir got up and sang the most beautiful version of The Star Spangled Banner she had ever heard.

?It made me weak,? she says. ?I thought, ?Holy God, they sang that song every much as American as anybody else.?

She drew parallels between the racial strife which has punctuated so much of American history with the similar treatment of Canada's Indigenous peoples north of the border and it was a watershed moment for her.

?What they do and how they see the world is so beautiful and it makes us so rich as a country to have that,? says Ms. McEwen of the Indigenous voice, a voice with which she has come up close and personal over the last couple of years.

Joanna McEwen is the lead non-indigenous artist of Call to Action #83, a travelling art exhibition bringing together the works of 16 artists ? eight Indigenous and non-Indigenous ? for a very important conversation, through art, on Truth and Reconciliation.

The exhibition is a response of artists from York Region, Simcoe Region, Durham Region and beyond to Call to Action #83 contained in the final report from Canada's Truth & Reconciliation Commission for ?a strategy for indigenous and non-indigenous artists to undertake collaborative projects and produce works that contribute to the reconciliation process.?

The collective started off with one piece of art created by an Indigenous artist which was subsequently passed to a non-Indigenous artist who used the first work as inspiration for the second. This second piece was then handed over to an Indigenous artist who repeated the same process down the line. The caveat: each artist was only able to see the work immediately preceding theirs.

?I was delighted to say yes,? says Ms. McEwen when asked to participate as the exhibition's lead non-Indigenous artist. ?When someone creates something and they pass it on to another person, we call it ?wildfire' and the next person has to take elements or an element of what they have received. I was excited about the prospect and looking forward to seeing the work that would be passed on to me.?

What she ultimately received was a very dark-in-tone work from Mercedes Sandy, a younger Indigenous woman. Ms. McEwen describes the piece as ?a very dark piece, angry without much hope? and informed by the Residential School experience as well as the inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

?I thought, there has to be some light at the end of this tunnel,? she says, adding she enjoyed the inter-generational dialogue that also took place between herself and Ms. Sandy. ?We can't on like this forever and what I did with my work was try and indicate a turnaround.?

Her finished piece features wild strawberries, a hopeful symbol of the first fruits of spring.

?The artists who came together were very amenable and determined to be a positive experience, provide in-depth learning, and [facilitate] coming to grips with each other,? she explains. ?The non-Indigenous artist is probably taken aback and surprised by the flow. Follow the threads from one to the other. Threads can be elements of design, but there are content threads going through.

?I saw this as a human experience, completely equal in every way. I hope the message is, ?We can get over this, we will get over this.' It is totally unique and I think it is very uplifting and hopeful.?

Call To Action, which has spent much of the last year touring galleries all around Ontario lands at the Aurora Cultural Centre this Saturday, August 12. It features the works of Peter Adams, Nathalie Bertin, Jennie Clark, Xavier Fernandes, Marilyn George (Nahtwekakatusake, Lakota: Holy Star Woman), Robert Henry (Sagajiwegiiwegiizhik, Coming from the Sun), Clayton Samuel King (Waab Shki Makoons, New Little White Bear), Nancy King (Ogimaakwebnes, Chief Lady Bird), Jeannette Luchese, Christina Luck, Joanna McEwen, Mary Louise Meiers, Jon Oelrichs, Mercedes Sandy, Paul Shilling (Dazaunggee), and Paul Whittman (Negik, Star Otter)

A formal opening reception will be held Saturday, August 19, from 1 ? 4 p.m. in conjunction with Doors Open Aurora.