

Cultural Centre lifts curtain on new Spring exhibitions



Works by Jing Fu, left, and Brandon Baghaee, the Aurora Cultural Centre's winter Artist in Residence, will take pride of place in the Centre's galleries this month - and residents are invited to celebrate the launch of their respective exhibitions. Images courtesy of the Aurora Cultural Centre

Local art lovers will have plenty to celebrate at the Aurora Cultural Centre this Thursday, May 7, when they invite the community to mark the launch of a series of spring exhibitions.

Taking centre-stage at the Centre's Spring Halls Soiree will be the work of Brandon Baghaee, the Aurora Cultural Centre's artist-in-residence this past winter, whose exhibition, *In a Friendly Sky*, will explore his Jamaican-Canadian roots through the art of portraiture.

Building on his signature surreal, hyperrealist self-portraits, the paintings in this series move beyond the autobiographical to explore questions of diasporic identity, culture, and genealogy, says the Centre. In this series, the artist explores his relationship to his Jamaican grandparents through self-portraiture, seamlessly weaving family history with broader cultural and historical references. Tapping into bell hooks' writings on building Black community through liberatory habits of being, Brandon connects to his grandparents by recreating their daily practices within his paintings.

Although the artist appears alone in his compositions, he invokes his grandparents' presence through the everyday artifacts that signify their lives and habits.

Ashlyn Gregory, Interim Gallery Manager for the Aurora Cultural Centre, says prior to being appointed the Winter Artist-in-Residence, Baghaee often worked with small canvasses. Taking advantage of the studio space at the Centre allowed him to think big.

These are life-sized autobiographical self-portraits he's working through as he considers his relationship to his grandparents, says Gregory. They're very focused on ties of kinship, what we inherit from our culture, our lineage, our family members, and also just really focusing on that connection between him and his grandparents.

The Centre's Artist in Residence program provides chosen artists with a paid three-month opportunity to create within its studio space within Aurora Town Square, connect with professionals, and produce a body of work that features in a gallery show at the end of the term.

Four of the featured works were created during Baghaee's residency.

It's something that can be a real career-launcher because Brandon is only 23, he's a recent graduate from OCAD, and it's really rare to see such a young artist have such a fulsome understanding of his craft, his practice, and just a fantastic research-based approach to his work, says Gregory. The interesting thing about Brandon's work is it is so layered in meaning. Everything is very intentional, everything means something, so being able to do some research into the history of Jamaica, where his grandparents are from, and

that culture allowed him to create these really meaningful pieces of work.?

The following week, on May 14, the Cultural Centre will welcome artist Jing Fu with her new exhibition *Unearthed: My Equilibrium*.

The exhibition shows the two sides of Fu's work: atmospheric landscapes and abstracts.

Informed by her training in 'shan shui' (literally translated as 'mountains and water' paintings), the works on display balance Eastern aesthetics with local influences, says the Centre. Since immigrating to Canada from urban Shanghai more than twenty years ago, Fu's close observations of southern Ontario's natural environments have become central to her practice. A frequent hiker and prolific painter, she expertly translates her meditations on the natural world onto canvas.

If Fu's landscapes evoke the opposing yet harmonious forces of nature on a grand scale, her *Roots* series turns inward, offering a more intimate exploration of nature's symbolism and symmetry. Through bold brushstrokes and richly layered textures, she conveys the strength of the gnarled tree roots, while the finely rendered details reveal the delicacy of the intricate root networks beneath our feet. Together, these two bodies of work reflect her pursuit of both internal and artistic balance as she moves fluidly between Eastern and Western visual languages.?

Fu's exhibition is the first Gregory has curated for the Aurora Cultural Centre in her interim role and says it's been a very rewarding experience.

At first, we were really seeing the bodies of work as separate, as two different practices, but through talking to Jing and learning more about how she works, it was very clear to me that she moves fluidly between these two theories, she says. At first I saw them as separate, but I think it's all part of a very well-integrated arts practice.

Another really interesting thing I've taken away from watching Jing work is that I think she's a little bit of a perfectionist in that she'll come back to previous paintings and add to them. She has some work that she's worked on for a period of 15-plus years. It's like she's never finished with the work and she's always coming back to it with fresh interpretations and I think that's really interesting.?

The Aurora Cultural Centre's Spring Halls Soiree will take place this Thursday, May 7, from 6.30 - 8.30 p.m. and all are welcome. Light refreshments will be provided.

The Centre will host the opening night reception for *Unearthed: My Equilibrium* on Thursday, May 14, from 6.30 - 8.30 p.m.

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