

Food security and sovereignty in focus for Letters to the Earth exhibition



Letters to the Earth, an art exhibition currently underway at the Aurora Cultural Centre's temporary gallery at Town Hall by Carmel Brennan, has brought together a diverse group of artists to share their unique perspectives on the planet we call home through traditional art forms and the written word.

In amongst the paintings, sculptures and assorted 2D works, however, is a very different, living experience – an agriculture vertical indoor aquatic system installed by engineer and educator Phil Fung.

Next Wednesday, July 19, at 7 p.m., the community is invited to Town Hall for what is described as a "mid-exhibition harvest."

Fung's work focuses on environmental solutions and innovative spins on agriculture. His award-winning Vertical Indoor Aquatic Ecosystem combines aquaponics, hydroponics, and natural soil production, fuelled by consistent light sources and the "output" from nearly a dozen fish hard at work to create fertilizer.

Looking at how his innovation fits into the themes of the Letters to the Earth exhibition, Fung says he was struck by how many artists had "dispirited" messages. His work, he says, is an "option of hope" in that it underscores practices that are "regenerative."

"Right now, many things are happening in the world that are degenerated, the earth is being damaged" and we had an opportunity and option here to provide some hope, or some regenerative measures that can make people feel better and "many people feel there is nothing we can do. What we are doing is [showing] that everybody, every one of us, can do something. The food system looks at two regenerative measures in terms of human wellbeing; one is physical health and one is mental health."

It is also an opportunity, he says, to look at the differences between "food security" and "food sovereignty." There are four elements in food sovereignty, he explains: food security, safety, diversity, and food responsibility."

"We put this system into the community and every community can have their own food supply right there; this is food security. Food diversity is a big thing right now and one of the problems is [people] have no control of the kind of food coming to their shop. It means there is no food diversity and we all understand a balanced diet is so important?. With microgreens, your food diversity is huge, especially when you go into different communities that have their own kind of preference for vegetables, crops and diet. We allow them to grow anything and everything. We have a list of crops and some crops grow better in fish poop, some in soil, some in water only, and no other system can do that.

"When we grow our food, we must preserve the land. We cannot damage the land just because we want to harvest our food. We

have to make sure nutrients and the fertilizer we use will not damage the soil or damage the underground water. We can grow our own food, but we must do so in a sustainable way to be responsible to our land, our soil, our water. Many people don't care, they just want to harvest, harvest, harvest.?

An added benefit to the system, he notes, is yet another way to enjoy "nature therapy," the value for which can't be underestimated.

"Our system can enhance the mental health of the user and humankind has a natural connection with nature. Our system offers hope to people; everyone can contribute and enjoy physical and mental health therapy through our system. They will gain both physical health and the opportunity of the nature therapy and they learn all three methods and can grow anything. Farming is one of the few activities that have the intergenerational benefits, from parents, grandparents, to the kids.

"My ultimate goal is to contribute to the creation of resilient communities. Everybody talks about resilient communities these days, but how do you make it resilient? There are many elements. You look at transportation, the water system, but you also need to look at the food system. You need to look at the mental health support system? These are all the ingredients in the resilient community.?"

For more information on next week's Mid-Exhibition Harvest, whether you want to get your hands dirty or just observe, visit auroraculturalcentre.ca/event/letters-to-the-earth-harvest.

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