

?Letters to the Earth: Between Despair & Hope? melds images with the written word

As wildfires raged in Alberta and Nova Scotia, a new exhibition at the Aurora Cultural Centre took a closer look at environmental crises through poignant hand-written letters and visual works by more than 40 artists.

Letters to the Earth: Between Despair & Hope is open now at the Aurora Cultural Centre's temporary gallery space on the second floor of Town Hall.

Curated by artist Carmel Brennan, the show, which is one of several running across the country through 2024, is hoped to spark a conversation about environmental issues happening around the globe as artists highlight the issues that matter to them.

?At the beginning of the pandemic, we all had to make our environment safe because we were going to be stuck in our homes,? says Brennan, recalling the origins of the show.

Finding an old hornet's nest in her backyard, she opened it up and was struck by the beauty of its interior structure.

?I was just astounded at how gorgeous this was and I started to think that this was a home,? she says. ?We knocked down one thing on the planet and it affects everything else in line. I started to feel guilty and then I started to look at my own carbon footprint and the way I live.?

She wrote her thoughts down as a ?letter to the earth? and put a call out to her circle of artists to do the same.

?I said we have to do something personal about this,? says Brennan of underscoring the environmental problems all around us. ?We can't just start blaming people like governments and corporations, let's see what we can do. I wanted the letters handwritten as that is important rather than tapping it out on a keyboard. I started collecting the letters and they are like beautiful works of art themselves.?

Artists were asked to pair their letters with visual arts, such as painting and photography, and the results are now in Aurora.

The project, she says, started off small, but has attracted the attention not just of artists, but First Nations elders, environmental scientists and more, all of whom were intrigued by the idea, wanting to get involved.

?When you read the letters, some of them would make you cry you'd be so moved,? says Brennan. ?One of the artists, Akira Yoshikawa, was born in Hiroshima after the bomb dropped, but his mother was affected; her daughter died when she was a baby and her husband eventually died, too, from the effect of the bomb. She wrote about the effects of the blast and [that] there is still damage to the earth from that kind of thing ? and people are worried with what happens with Russia and Ukraine.

?Janet Hendershot talks about running through the mud as a child and how much of a pleasure it is; now all we get is draught. Lillian Michiko Blakey talks about the nets and stuff in the ocean that animals are getting caught in [and ponders] what if it was a child swimming in the ocean getting caught? I was so moved by some of the phrases that came out of the letters, phrases you wouldn't have thought, and because they're handwritten, they move you even more so.?

In addition to the displayed letters and visual artworks, a desk also features in the exhibition where visitors will be invited to sit down and write their own ?letters to the earth.?

?When you write a letter, you can put it in a binder and your letter will be part of the project,? says Brennan. ?Once you recognize in yourself what the concerns in the environment are and what you can do ? like when you're brushing your teeth, turn the water off ? and I am hoping that people will look at each artwork and statement and reflect?.coming away reflecting on something and to keep a memory of it.?

Letters to the Earth runs at the Aurora Cultural Centre through August 23.

On July 19 at 7 p.m., guests are invited to come to the gallery space to take in the work of Phil Fung, which takes the form of a vertical garden featuring hydroponics, aquaponics, and natural soil production, and to help harvest the resulting greens following an interactive artists' presentation.

The Centre will host a closing discussion with Brennan on August 23 at 7 p.m.

For more information, visit auroraculturalcentre.ca.

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