

Light Grows the Tree showcases emerging Black creators



By Brock Weir

Systemic racism can be found in many places and forms, including violence and exclusion — all to the detriment of everyone in society, but Black creators — artists, sculptors, photographers, and more — see the opportunity to make sense of their history and begin a renewed conversation.

This is the vision of Liz Ikiriko, whose curated exhibition *Light Grows the Tree*, showcasing Black artists, writers, curators and collectors in the Greater Toronto Area, is on now through November 23 at the Aurora Cultural Centre.

Shining a light on more than 40 artists, *Light Grows the Tree* made its debut in 2017 in *The Ethnic Aisle*, an online space dedicated to providing a forum for marginalized Canadian makers. This early showcase soon morphed into *Light Grows the Tree*, a travelling exhibition aimed at providing more opportunities to create relationships between disparate communities.

“Making visible the very real, talented, emerging to well-established Black artists working today functions as a point of recognition for an eager viewer who may not have had this beacon of hope presented to them previously,” says Ms. Ikiriko in her curator’s statement. “Planting the seeds and providing the light is a way of supporting generations of creators to guide us forward. In an age such as the one we are living in, our acts of care are not simply enjoyable, they are crucial.”

The portraits that form *Light Grows the Tree* were taken by four photographers — Ikiriko, Yannick Anton, Ebtî Nabag, and Dainesha Nugent-Palache — over two months, and “these portraits do the work of making the Black arts community visible,” says Yaniya Lee in an introduction to the show. “The Black diaspora has always struggled with the problem of history and

archive. It's the reason Black arts in Canada continue to exist as a rumour. Parallel to the ways in which our histories in the nation have been rewritten and erased, Black arts in Canada have become an absented presence. This is the first chapter in a project that seeks to recognize a community whose endeavours have been rendered palimpsestic by consistent disregard from historicized Canadian art history.

The stakes of Black culture in Canada are high. Systemic racism in the form of violence and exclusion tears at the fabric of our many communities. Through visual arts, we create new worlds and make sense of our histories, we are emboldened to confront the prerogatives of a multiculturalism that eclipses our integral place in the nation. There is such rich nuance to blackness here: it is no single thing. Our endeavours are held in the memories of several generations of folks who have shaped the Black arts scene through their various contributions. Going into the future, we need to know of each other's existence. Just as a tree needs light to grow, this community requires attention to focus and develop. In this first chapter, *Light Grows the Tree* begins the process of acknowledging those who have been the life force of Black arts in Toronto.

The Aurora Cultural Centre began looking at this first chapter after learning more at the Old Town Hall gallery in Newmarket. Aurora Cultural Centre curator Clare Bolton then made it her mission to bring the works here to Aurora.

It was important for me to bring this exhibition to the Aurora Cultural Centre for several reasons, said Ms. Bolton at this month's gallery opening. We are showcasing to the community of Aurora the works of four exceptional photographers. Therefore, in addition to the subject matter highlighting emerging to well-established Black artists is the actual quality of the photography in this exhibition.

It is my hope this exhibition will continue to travel and initiate new relationships with artists and different communities. At the Aurora Cultural Centre, we intend to invite artists back and have already spoken with Liz Ikiriko about creating a future exhibition at the Centre.

At the opening Ms. Ikiriko stated that in her experience curating this exhibition she uncovered many gaps and separations between so many people, including between artists who have decades of work under their belts and younger generations who are just coming up, and the collection is intended to foster these lasting connections.

It has been great coming back to this work after two years because I think because of the pace of our lives these days [where I feel like I] can't keep up with news media, with what is happening everywhere else in the world, it is usually terrifying and devastating, and I think it is really important to actually reflect on what's happening, what's happened and pay attention to the people we are and how we're always becoming more and more and more, she said.

?Hanging this show was a really phenomenal thing because I hadn't looked at the work in two years and there have been so many incredible achievements with this group of people who are in this exhibition. also is important for me to acknowledge that our achievements as Black folk especially in Canada and Ontario, those achievements are not solely felt, they are felt by the greater community and that is why this is such a wonderful thing to see here. [It is also great] to connect Aurora because I grew up in Saskatchewan and I didn't see references to Black artists in my community. I don't know if it is a cliché, but the idea of 'if you can't see it you can't be it' is so true. To be able to have young folk come in and see all these different artists, whether they are sculptors, photographers, painters, all these paths that are now opening up, I think it is just wonderful to see it happening here in Aurora.?