

Local art teacher explores 'surreal' life at Library gallery



**By
Brock Weir**

As an instructor, Kim Steffen is inspired every time she walks into the classroom.

Ms. Steffen, who teaches art at Aurora Montessori School on Industrial Parkway North, drives home the fact that in her classroom mistakes are allowed and flights of fancy are encouraged.

It opens up new doors to students, she says, and the work they produce has opened up new doors to her as well.

Ms. Steffen explores these whimsical flights of fancy in her new exhibition Surrealist Landscapes, on now through May 5, at the Aurora Public Library's Colleen Abbott Gallery.

She has always had a passion for art. She grew up in a household with an artist for a mother and a father, a printer by trade, also in the arts.

Following her passion, she studied art at Mount Allison and received her Masters degree from the Pratt Institute of Art and Design in New York City.

'That really opened my mind up to different ways of doing art,' she says.

While her work can range from abstracts to realism, here she focuses on whimsy with paintings some have said display a touch of Dali, as well as vibrant works in plasticine.

‘I get inspired by the kids,’ she says. ‘I love how children are just open to new things, to their imaginations. The number one thing I say to the kids is it is okay to make mistakes in art ’ and now kids will say the same thing to themselves. These pieces are inspired by the kids and their imaginations. In the past and how artwork doesn't have to be right or wrong.

‘This exhibit gives me the opportunity to show my work. I used to show in galleries when I was in New York and I showed at the Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibit, but being a teacher and a fulltime parent just slowed my process in showing my art. Art has come second, so it is nice to be able to [exhibit] in a public space. It's great too because a lot of the kids I teach come to the Library and parents can see what I do.’

Indeed, this might be the very first time students have the chance to see their teacher in action, following her passion. When they see her paintings on the wall, she says she hopes the kids ‘ her students and those in the community at large ’ will see that it is okay to ‘be free with your imagination.’

‘I do very tight work, very realistic, and technically I am able to draw well, but I hope these pieces convey a sense of freedom to just do what you want in art,’ she says. ‘Art is the best subject to be teaching, period. It trumps every other subject. I am lucky I get to go into the classroom every day and when the kids see me they are so excited because they just know they are going to be doing art. It is just magical and special. Everybody has a little bit off the artist in them.’