

MCOYA gives students a chance to express selves through art



As a young person of colour in what they describe as a 'predominantly White area,' Sydney Stewart, a Grade 12 student at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School wanted to give a voice to 'Black students like me,' particularly given today's political climate.

Putting her artistic talents in action, she created an evocative image of a young Black boy, standing before the American flag with his fist in the air as a sign of resistance.

'I think there's a lot of blood on Americans' hands regarding race' and I felt like everyone has seen what's been going on in America, especially since 2020, and I want this piece to be a conversation.'

The conversation starter is entitled 'AmeriKKKA' and is now on display at Town Hall as part of the Aurora Cultural Centre's Mayor's Celebration of Youth Arts (MCOYA), which formally opened last Wednesday, February 15, at the Centre's temporary gallery space at the seat of government.

Sponsored by Geranium Homes, this year's MCOYA is the first show open for in-person viewing since the start of the global pandemic, bringing together the work of 53 Grade 12 students from across the community.

'I knew this exhibition would be brilliant and you have all far exceeded my expectations,' said Kristen Donoghue-Stanford, Gallery Assistant for the Aurora Cultural Centre, addressing the artists at the opening reception. 'It takes a lot of trust in others with your work and you all did it so wholeheartedly. We were blown away as your submissions came in and then once again when we got to see the beautiful works in person. It was an absolute delight to install these works and see it come together'

'You have all come together here to showcase your work but more importantly yourselves and what you value, what you wish to be seen and heard. Seeing this exhibition come together and seeing all of you here tonight, I hold great hopes for the future of arts in Aurora.'

What she values and what she wants to be seen and heard is certainly reflected in Stewart's work.

She says she wants her work to prove that 'not everyone looks the same, some people don't have as much privilege as other people, and the same perspectives, and even though not everyone has the same perspective or the same opinions on what's happening, I think

when you look at the piece and you see the statement of the fist in the air, the American flag ? and I did the stars wonky because everyone in America is so different ? just to show that historically there is a lot happening within not only America, but within North America.?

?I wanted my piece to be controversial and that's why I gave it the name. I think it's important to have this conversation because growing up here we never had this talk about race and discrimination and I think with the climate we're currently in it's a statement piece and it lets people talk about it. The message is so clear, it allows a space for people to converse about what's occurring and that's all I really wanted.?

Beyond North America, Aurora High School Grade 12 artist Ameliija Le Moine used her art to express anger over the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian woman who was arrested for not wearing a hijab.

?I think women are really limited by what they can wear and I think society has put a lot of pressure on women for what they can show, what they can't show, and I think this is just a painting to show the liberty women should have with their coverage and it's kind of their choice,? said Le Moine.

Le Moine has always had a passion for hair.

She's had her own hairstyling business since she was in Grade 5 and regularly books gigs for proms and weddings ? and amassing a steady following with her hair tutorial videos on TikTok.

?The Mayor's Celebration of Youth Arts is an event that gives young artists a chance to show their creativity, interpretation of life events, powerful themes, or just the simplicity of everyday emotions,? said Mayor Tom Mrakas. ?Visual arts and for that matter all forms of arts and culture are truly one of the bedrocks of our community. The arts bring people together, help us better understand our society, gives people an important outlet for self-expression, while also providing young people with opportunities to build new skills that can eventually lead to exciting and meaningful careers.

?You should be very proud of the brilliant pieces you have created. Keep up the amazing work. Thank you to the parents of these young artists who have given them tools, foundation, encouragement and time to explore their artistic abilities.?

Added Cheryl Shindruk, Executive Vice President of Geranium Homes, ?On behalf of our entire team, congratulations to the Grade 12 students whose art is included in this year's exhibition. As a land developer and home builder, Geranium believes it is important and it is our responsibility to make a positive and lasting impact on the communities in which we have the honour of building. Your creativity never ceases to astound us. The variety of work and extraordinary talent on display here is remarkable. We hope you are all proud of your accomplishments.?

The Mayor's Celebration of Youth Arts runs in-person and virtually through March 18. For more, see, auroraculturalcentre.ca/mcoya2023.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter