

Menard scratches well below the surface with 'Watershed' show

By Brock Weir

Surface features are only a subtle hint on what's beneath when it comes to local watersheds and sometimes the same thing can be said for art.

But these two spheres are coming together in a new show by artist Liz Menard that is designed to allow viewers to dive in. 'Watershed', a solo exhibition by Ms. Menard is a showcase of print and mixed media art focusing on our water system, the biodiversity it supports, and indigenous plant species. Its opening coincides with Call to Action #83, a touring show of Indigenous and non-Indigenous art designed to highlight Truth and Reconciliation.

For Ms. Menard, there is a lot of common ground between her work and the Call to Action #83 Collective.

'I think there is a lot of common ground,' she says. 'The native species I have delved into in my art also happen to be the ones that are respected by Indigenous people who, for millennia, have recognized the medicinal and aesthetic beauty of these plants.'

The beauty of these unique ecosystems was never lost on Ms. Menard. Born with what 'a profound love of nature,' being around water, plants and animals, has always been a part of her from the time she could walk and talk.

Describing her work as 'quiet, thoughtful and subtle,' she found herself particularly drawn to the Don River watershed about four years ago, which unexpectedly became the focus of an exhibition she was working on at that time.

'I really didn't know what I wanted to focus on, but all my life I've driven down past the Don River and always found it so fascinating,' she said. 'I just started wandering and collecting information and reading, and started going into the Toronto Archives. This body of work just emerged out of that study and it is ongoing.'

Fuelling her love is finding beauty in unexpected places.

'Once I was walking around the Lower Don River and took a path I wasn't expecting to take,' she explains. 'I found a little pond down at the bottom of Riverdale Farm and I couldn't figure out why this little pond was there. It didn't make sense to me and I didn't even try to answer the question but it was an itch I needed to scratch.'

'About three months later, I woke up in the middle of the night and thought, 'Of course! It is one of the oxbows of the river from its original shape and trajectory. Although we have channelized, straightened and covered everything up, the river has a basic nature that it will not be ignored. That set me on a whole path that if the Don River has a memory, it will remember the time before pavement.'

Nature will never be ignored, nor will history and tradition and there too are some of the parallels.

She never had any doubt, she said, that her art could be fused with a message but she realised it was hitting its mark when viewers began telling her that they were starting to look at things differently.

'I am constantly humbled by what people tell me of my work,' she says. 'There is a whole conversation around where we have been, where we are and where we could go, but it is not evident, it is not obvious. I am really excited about this. I think it is a tremendous honour and a wonderful opportunity. There is only one artist out there I know, so I think this is going to be a marvellous opportunity. I am thrilled and honoured to be invited to present at the Aurora Cultural Centre and to be showing concurrently with the Call to Action exhibition.'

Watershed opens this Saturday, August 12, at the Aurora Cultural Centre.