

Running Forward ? or running out of time? Tire tracks tell a story in new exhibition



By Brock Weir

What do you see when the rubber hits the road? Do you see where someone has already been, or do you see an already carved path to where you want to go?

Each track tells a story and, for artist Daniel St-Amant, the journey is all about the ultimate destination.

Mr. St-Amant's series of nature paintings are now on the walls of the Aurora Cultural Centre through May 25 in Running Forward, but if you're expecting to see photograph-like paintings of eagles soaring above a lush tree canopy or a wolf pack trudging through an intricately depicted tundra landscape, be prepared for something a little more provocative.

It all starts by taking it to the streets.

Before he begins a painting, Mr. St-Amant grabs his canvas and hits the road ? literally. Stretched across the pavement, primed for oncoming cars to run over, the vehicles leave their distinctive mark on the previously pristine canvas. Although each track tells a story of its own, they combine to form a symbolic, albeit unlikely, backdrop to his vision of nature, and perhaps even a call to action.

?I am from the country and I spent a lot of time playing in the woods every day,? he recalls. ?I remember figuring out when I was young the only way to make a living would be to get out of the country unless I wanted to be a farmer, which I didn't want to be. I wanted to go to the city, get a lot and be an artist. When you get to the city, you start to crave the country and just see pavement and

concrete everywhere. There wasn't a lot of greenspace and I think, subconsciously, this is where it has led me.?

Priming his canvas

with the tracks of passing cars is a unique process which, he says, serves to challenge viewers to reflect on how industrialism, urbanization and the over-use of resources are changing people, animals and habitats everywhere.?

Early works in his

series used more traditional depictions of loons, wolves and bears, to name just a few species brought to life on top of the tire tracks. More recent additions to his portfolio take more literal inspiration from nature, combining found objects such as twigs, leaves and moss mixed into the paint, to add texture, depth and character to animal silhouettes.

The animals are

living in, and adapting to the environment we're making, he says. You see raccoons living in the city and they are better fed than the raccoons living in the woods because they are living off our garbage, but then they have higher rates of diabetes and they die earlier. It's the same with birds. Recently, [I considered] why not make the animals out of the environment?

How does the forest

floor look when you walk in the woods? I am trying to create a dialogue. I have had a lot of people who look at my paintings and it is like they have never stopped to look at the forest floor, or they have never stopped to look at a tree. People always think the animal paintings are beautiful, but when they realise [they're painted] on tire tracks, sometimes they get sad. It is almost like a slap in their face. Everyone knows what is happening is bad and there are effects.?

Aurora Cultural

Centre curator Stephanie Nicolo agrees, noting that, from her perspective, the use of natural elements in each of the paintings on show illustrates, the more you ignore [what is before you], the easier it is to ignore the criticalness of everything that is going on in your environment.

This has the story

of why we need to conserve and why we need to be thinking about those processes while still staying within that beauty of the canon of painting animals. I think we, as humans, as an audience, find beauty in these works because we have a primal connection to nature. We may not acknowledge it on the first glance, but that is part of why we see the beauty in his work. We have this wanting of connecting with nature.?

Daniel St-Amant's

Running Forward? is on now at the Aurora Cultural Centre through Saturday, May 25. He will be in the gallery for an opening reception on March 22 from 6 ? 8 p.m., and again on March 30 for a demonstration from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

For more information, visit www.auroraculturalcentre.ca.