

Students set to take over Aurora Town Square as Art Celebration nears



Student Joycelyn Ng has kept her artistic eye on a distinct local goal.

A student at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School, she was in a Grade 11/12 art class last year as part of the younger cohort when she first learned about the Mayor's Celebration of Youth Art, an annual showcase of Aurora graduates hosted by the Aurora Cultural Centre.

Ng was excited about the possibility of having her work displayed publicly, and may have had an extra year or so to prepare, but now, in Grade 12, Ng is among the dozens of budding artists set to take over the Centre and Aurora Town Square next month for the Mayor's Celebration of Youth Arts (MCOYA) 2025.

"You dream about having your art out there, but that opportunity never shows up now it's here!" says Ng.

Ng was one of four participating students at the Aurora Cultural Centre last week to see the walls their work will soon grace.

Set to be hosted at the historic Church Street School for the first time since the building was closed to the public due to the construction of Aurora Town Square, this year's MCOYA will be bigger than ever before a fitting return to home base.

"We have had limited space of two artworks per student, but this year we have expanded it to four that is a very big number," says Aurora Cultural Centre Gallery Assistant Adora Lau. "We're very excited to see students interacting with this space. I know this location has a lot of history with the Aurora Cultural Centre and I am very excited to see how students are going to [use] it."

Traditionally, MCOYA has taken over the Centre's two homeroom galleries as well as the first and second floor hallways. This year, however, the corridors extend through Town Square, from the lobby of the Performance Hall at the top down to the Café at ground level.

"We're expecting a lot of sculpture as, with our growing space, we have really opened up and encouraged [bigger pieces] from students and so far, from all of my classroom visits, I have seen a lot of smaller works and even up to larger scale ones and this is an upward trend," says Lau. "Students are sharing their personal stories and lived experiences through their art and connecting it to greater, more political and social topics."

One such student who is touching upon social injustice is St. Max student Valerie Santoianni.

Citing an oil painting earmarked for the show, Valerie describes it as a "beautifully-painted" landscape "but for one small blip.

"It's supposed to have no flaw, except there is a black dot somewhere around the middle that is going to draw attention from the audience," Valerie explains, adding another piece is a charcoal of a Barbie that goes beyond the doll.

"I want to leave my audience feeling inspired, but to also have their own interpretation. The dot is supposed to draw attention and trigger different emotions "and I want to engage with the audience in that piece."

Cardinal Carter Catholic High School student Narminah Khurran is also touching upon social topics, including Christianity, in her pieces.

"All of the works I put into MCOYA are compositions I feel speak to what is going on in the world right now, and how I feel about myself and how others may see themselves in my artwork," says Narminah, noting one piece entitled I Am a Woman Too, looks at how women have been "objectified" in art. "She is in a candid moment, but she doesn't have a conventional body type you might consider attractive, but she is still beautiful. You can tell she is comfortable with herself and I feel bright colours really show that.

"I want [audiences] to get a sense of who I am, and my personality, including how that shows in my art. I want them to understand what my views are and how I express them in my artwork."

The work of Jelena Shakkour also goes beyond the surface, looking at how family roots have influenced the completed works.

"I really want to put my work out there because I feel that even though I have such a passion, a talent, and put so much work into creating these pieces, nobody really sees them except for me, and knowing that other people would see it [through MCOYA] in a public place really piqued my interest," says Jelena. "I thought about the meaning behind each work and one of them is a surrealist drawing of my grandmother. I wanted to put that out there because not only is it my hard work, but it is also a reflection of our family and our experiences."

Experiences have also inspired Ng's choices.

"I went with a theme of how I am on my current journey, not just an art journey but how I am doing in life kind of journey," says Joycelyn. "It's based on how I express myself through dressing. For example, I am growing out my hair right now. Previously I cut it super-short in Grade 9 and 10 and now I am feeling more feminine. That is one aspect of my life that I kind of have more control over right now. It is that gender expression going in and now that I am getting older, I am starting to understand how important my culture is to me and my upbringing, incorporating a lot of my Hong Kong, Chinese heritage into my work as well.

"Even though I am a minority, I still think I am pretty cool!?"

The Mayor's Celebration of Youth Arts opens February 8 at the Aurora Cultural Centre, running through April 20. A pre-opening Gala will kick-off the celebration on Friday, February 7, from 6.30 - 8.30 p.m. in the Homeroom Galleries. Additional events related to MCOYA 2025 include a Youth Yoga + Sound Bath event on Monday, March 10, from 3 - 4 p.m., and a Youth Open Mic on Saturday, April 5, from 1 - 3 p.m. For more information on the exhibition and these initiatives, visit auroraculturalcentre.ca/mcoya25.

By Brock Weir