

Texture reigns supreme in 'Raw Material' show



By Brock Weir

The word 'blacksmith' often conjures up cozy images of a man hunched over an anvil, hammering a glowing red hunk of iron into shape and searing it onto the hoof of a horse. But the very idea of shoeing a horse makes Kyle Thornley blanch.

Instead, he forges ahead making beautiful pieces of art and functional pieces of furniture through the craft.

It is not a dying art, he contends, having come into the world of the blacksmith, in his words, 'on the coattails of a group from the late 70s that really started a renaissance or resurgence.'

A regular exhibitor of the Double Door Gallery in Anten Mills near Barrie, he was among the first artists gallery owner Michael Coughlin turned to when collaborating with the Aurora Cultural Centre on their new exhibition 'Raw Material.'

Aurora Cultural Centre curator Clare Bolton had visions of an exhibition celebrating 'texture' in all its forms, and Mr. Coughlin turned to Thornley, along with mixed media artist Jennie Clark, Jill Price, Chum McLeod, glass painter Cheryl Goleski, and woodworker Bernice Vassey to bring together a varied show and sale featuring metalwork, woodwork, glass, traditional paints, fabric, and any combination thereof.

Now on display at the Cultural Centre through December 17, the show formally opened last Thursday.

'Clare had a fairly distinct idea of texture,' said Mr. Coughlin who transformed the barn in his family's long-time farm into studio ' and later gallery ' space in the 1990s. 'She had a very definitive idea: she wanted glass, she wanted metal, and that's how Kyle gets in.'

Coinciding with the growth of the Double Door Gallery was the growth in the blacksmith trade. The economy was strong at this point, there was money in it, collectors were converging and many young people took it up, said Kyle.

'I was really lucky to have a number of mentors and people to study under because it is pretty challenging to figure it out all on your own,' he said, adding he was always fascinated by metal as a material. 'It started when I was young on carnival rides when your life is hanging in the balance just looking at the tubing and welds.'

Getting his feet wet in welding, he turned in a more creative direction with increased study.

'It is a fun and life-long learning process,' he says. 'There is tons to learn and tons of tools to bring your vision to life. [The market] is a little bit challenging because a lot of the old styling is losing its place. There is a contemporary modern styling in a lot of homes, so people are struggling a little on how to still keep their prominence in the building arts. For me, it is trying to move in the direction of contemporary style as far as the architecture goes, but as far as art, hopefully you can make whatever you like and hopefully people dig it, and will be able to sponsor my pursuit to keep moving on.'

Ms. Vassey is another artist who found her niche with both form and function. Introduced to woodworking as a college student in the 1970s, she found she was instantly comfortable with the medium. Her works on display at the Cultural Centre now include bookshelves, hall stands, and tables, all with a unique flair, including one piece that incorporates a repurposed steamer trunk.

'Through having to fix and repair [as the shop technician at Georgian College] as I went along, my skills kept developing and because I don't have basic formal training in cabinetmaking I learnt as I went along,' she said. 'My background in college was

sculptural and wood was just a part of it. Then I wanted to be able to do sculptural, functional furniture as opposed to strictly functional or non-functional, but now it is a blend of both ? and hopefully they are sellable!?