

Winter Artist-in-Residence shines light on Jamaican roots through *In a Friendly Sky*



Brandon Baghaee spent the last few months behind the yellow-brick walls of the Aurora Cultural Centre exploring his Jamaican roots as the Centre's Winter Artist-in-Residence.

Now that the paint is dry, his artistic vision is bringing new life to the Centre's lower hall gallery through his new exhibition, *In a Friendly Sky*.

On now through August 2, *In a Friendly Sky* takes Baghaee's signature surreal, and hyper-realistic self-portraits and interprets them through a new lens as he explores his 'diasporic identity, culture, and genealogy.'

'In this series, the artist explores his relationship to his Jamaican grandparents through self-portraiture, seamlessly weaving family history with broader cultural and historical references,' says the Centre. 'Tapping into bell hooks' writings on building Black community through liberatory habits of being, Brandon connects to his grandparents by recreating their daily practices within his paintings.'

'Although the artist appears alone in his compositions, he invokes his grandparents' presence through the everyday artifacts that signify their lives and habits. In 'Daphne', Brandon transforms his grandmother's hand-sewn wedding dress into a protective suit of armour, representing sewing as a form of resistance for Jamaican women. Similarly, 'Osmond's Sounds' evokes his music-loving grandfather through the sound system, paying homage to ground-breaking Jamaican audio engineer King Tubby. By tracing the material ties of kinship and culture, Brandon simultaneously visualizes his connection to his grandparents while situating himself within an imagined past.'

'Rendered with smooth, meticulous brushwork, Brandon's paintings evoke a soft, dreamlike intimacy that is nonetheless bold and declarative. By collapsing the distinctions between individual and family identity, Brandon articulates a profound identification with his lineage and culture, and a continuity between generations.'

Members of the public were invited to get their first glimpse of the new exhibition on Thursday, May 7, as the Centre hosted its annual Spring Soiree.

There, Interim Gallery Manager Ashlyn Gregory, welcomed guests and gave a special nod to Samantha Jones, the Cultural Centre's Gallery Manager. Now on maternity leave, Jones was instrumental in laying the groundwork for the artistic showcase.

It has been my pleasure to finish the work that Sam started on these exhibitions and to bring them into their final form," said Gregory. "Brandon's exhibition, *In a Friendly Sky*, presents a new body of work that explores his relationship to his Jamaican grandparents by weaving family history with broader cultural and historical references. Four of the paintings on display were created during his three-month residency, including the two large 48 by 60 canvases, which pay homage to his grandmother and his grandfather, who's here tonight.

"Though I've only known him a short time, I've been continually impressed by Brandon's intentionality, as well as his technical proficiency. His work is incredibly thoughtful and grounded, and he demonstrates a level of clarity in his artistic voice that's typically honed over years of practice. I know that he's going to continue to grow in his artistry and do amazing things."

Replied Baghae: "First things first, I want to thank everyone for coming out and supporting. It means a lot, and it's very important to support the arts and have community, and that's what's here. This is very beautiful to see. I also want to thank Aurora Cultural Centre, everyone on the Board, and the whole team. Specifically, I want to thank Sam, Adora [Lau] and Ashlyn for all of their support throughout the whole process, and really being there for me and being flexible and dealing with my tight timelines and working very close to this exhibition. I really appreciate it, and I'm super grateful."

By Brock Weir
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