

Worlds ? and anniversaries ? collide in SOYRA?s milestone show



By Brock Weir

As SOYRA ? the Society of York Region Artists ? marks its 30th anniversary this year, they wanted to do something big and, as luck would have it, they didn't have to go too far to find a big inspiration.

SOYRA is celebrating their milestone year by celebrating Canada, another institution celebrating a milestone year.

See Canada through the eyes of over 50 artists at the Aurora Cultural Centre now through January 29 in SOYRA's Showcase 2017. With a free opening reception set for this Saturday afternoon, January 14, from 1 ? 4 p.m., featuring live music in partnership with the Aurora Winter Blues Festival, it is a show that means quite a bit to the participating creative talent.

??I'm Canadian' comes across in the emotional content of the pictures,? says SOYRA president Linda Welch. ?I do a fair amount of travelling abroad and I always wear a Canadian flag in a prominent location. I find that it encourages conversation.?

Putting her own spin on the Canadian theme, Ms. Welch has entered an image of the RCMP's musical ride (?There is nothing more Canadian than a Mountie, in my mind.?) as well as an image of an old turn-of-the-century pump organ from Madoc, ON she uncovered lying on its side in an architectural scrapyard.

?It had played many, many times, and many, many songs,? she explains. ?Even though it is in bad shape and you'll never play it again, it's beautiful nonetheless. I am trying to honour the craftsmanship and the artisans who created such beautiful pieces. With the other artists, there are representative landscapes from right across the country to the far north. You can travel the length and breadth of Canada by looking at the paintings that are here.

?What I see [from their work] is a lot of vibrancy. I see a lot of well-travelled people and I would say at least a third of our members are from other countries and their work is reflecting their travels across Canada as well as the surprise and the beauty they see. It's really interesting to see new Russian immigrants painting snow scenes you can recognize from King Township, for instance.?

To augment their Canada 150 Theme, SOYRA will be hosting activities at the Aurora Cultural Centre for the duration of their show, particularly a public portrait painting demonstration on Saturday, January 21, from 1 ? 4 p.m. where eight SOYRA artists will be painting John Webster, Aurora's Official Town Crier in all his Victorian finery in a nod to Canada's past.

Ms. Welch has been a member of SOYRA for over 15 years, now half of the Society's very existence. Over 30 years, artists' collectives come and go, but SOYRA remains as vibrant as ever, spreading its reach far beyond York Region to attract members from Orangeville, Caledon, Toronto, and even Minden.

The secret to their success?

?We are a very friendly group and I think that is catching,? says Ms. Welch. ?The demographics of the group have changed considerably in that time. Originally, when I first joined, most people were retired or newly retired. They were not working full time. Now, I would say that probably 30 per cent of our members are still actively working. There is a younger demographic now. They are coming from a wider geography.

?Part of our meetings [give time] to people who are here for the first time. We welcome them, try to include them in the proceedings and people will get to know each other a little better and they come back. That is one of the nice things I keep hearing from new artists who join and maybe still belong to another group, or may have left other groups that weren't as friendly and welcoming. I think as long as we continue to do that, maintain standards and promote educational opportunities to allow our members to learn, improve and grow, they will be encouraged to grow.

?30 years is not a long, long time in the scheme of things, but it is a proud, proud landmark for us.?