

## Aboriginal women sing song of culture with art

Alison Brownlee

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HUNTSVILLE – A new art exhibition seeks to open a dialogue about aboriginal culture and heritage.

Artist Nathalie Bertin, curator of *This is My Song: Perspectives from Contemporary Native Women*, said the exhibition of aboriginal artwork is an opportunity to share the culture and heritage of their communities with the public.

The female artists come from across Canada and many are internationally renowned for their work. Artists include Arlette Wolfgirl Alcock, Christine Caluya, Lee Claremont, Raven Davis, Lee Deranger, Lita Fontaine, LauraLee K. Harris, Inuk ThreeSixty, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Suzanne Smoke, Janice Toulouse and Nathalie Bertin.

The exhibition is at the Huntsville Art Society's gallery, The Art Space, in downtown Huntsville.

"Last year, when I showed in different communities, every time was a great experience but every time I found myself

talking about native culture more than the art," said Bertin, who showed her work at the Huntsville gallery last year. "I noticed there was a huge lack of knowledge out there about who our First Nations people are and where they are coming from."

Once the opportunity to have another show in Huntsville presented itself, she said she decided to forego a second solo show and instead do something of educational value for the community.

"I knew there was a desire for First Nations women to get out there and have their voice heard. And I don't mean in a militant sense," she said. "It's more, 'This is who we are. We're not beggars and freeloaders. We are useful and in your society already, and this is who we are.'"

Bertin contacted several influential female artists and asked if they were interested in being a part of the show. The show would involve showing contemporary work that expresses the artists' aboriginal social history – or song – and an accurate portrayal of who they are in today's society.

The artists eagerly joined the show in an effort to reach out to the community and begin a discussion about their culture and heritage, said Bertin. And although the artists wanted to participate for the same reasons, each one's work is unique.

Christine Caluya, for example, created a colourful self-portrait that represents the vibrancy for her culture. The painting incorporates female pow-wow dancers, whose capes and dancing also symbolize an aboriginal community's heritage.

And LauraLee K. Harris uses the natural grain of wood and stain, along with poetry, to convey meaning. Harris said her work mirrors aboriginal culture as it incorporates introspection and depth along with education, emotion, thought and healing.

Bertin said she wants the show to engage the community.

"I'm hoping the exhibition provides a lot of awareness and education," she said.



**SINGING TOGETHER:** . Aboriginal artists LauraLee K. Harris, left, Nathalie Bertin and Christine Caluya celebrate the opening reception of *This is My Song: Perspectives from Contemporary Native Women* on June 2 at The Art Space. The contemporary show is a artistic exhibition of aboriginal heritage and culture. *Alison Brownlee*

Huntsville is the first stop for the exhibition. It will travel to several other communities in the province afterward, and now more aboriginal artists are asking to be a part of it, said Bertin.

"There is a tightness and bond between aboriginal women," said Bertin. "Despite the diversity (of work) and that you have artists coming from one end of Canada to the other, if you look at all the art together there is a connection."

Heritage, culture, family and the land are common themes in aboriginal artwork, she said, because they, like many other elements, are central in aboriginal heritage.

Rob Gill, co-ordinator for the show, said he is full of appreciation for the accomplished artists and is blown away by the caliber of their work.

This is My Song: Perspectives from Contemporary Native Women will be shown at The Art Space gallery in downtown Huntsville from June 1 to 30. The gallery is located off Queen Street across from River Mill Park and is open Thursday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

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