

Indigenous artists hope to continue important conversations beyond National Truth and Reconciliation Day

By Rob Paul

With National Truth and Reconciliation Day (September 30) and Culture Days underway at the Peel Art Gallery, Museum and Archives' (PAMA), the gallery is focusing on two artists whose Indigenous heritage drive them to create and continue to bring attention to the trials and tribulation the First Nations, Inuit and Métis have gone through in Canada.

The two featured artists are Inuk photographer Katherine Takpannie whose outdoor installation called 'One,' is currently running until January 3 and Tracey-Mae Chambers, who discovered in adulthood her Ojibwa-Métis heritage, will build her outdoor installation called 'Hope and Healing Canada,' on site on September 30. This will run until October 3.

As a photographer, Takpannie wanted to capture an image of herself that focused on the female figure while in the reproductive state while wearing an amautik, a mother's parka worn by Inuit women.

'My exhibit at PAMA is an image of myself wearing an amautik when I was pregnant with my son, and the amautik was made by a relative and sent down so it would be ready for when my son was born,' she said. 'It's really cool because the same image is currently on display at the National Gallery of Canada. I'm full of gratitude, it's a wonderful feeling to be able to share my art and educate non-Indigenous Canadians about Indigenous people with what we wear and who we are and what we hold dear to our hearts.'

Beginning her photography career in 2018 was a way to promote and share Indigenous culture through both issues and celebration of the people and their history.

'There's an entire section on education of Indigenous people within the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the very act of educating about our history which is also Canadian history and it's entirely needed, especially when our own Premier scraps [Indigenous education] in our Province,' she said. 'Everyone wants to learn more about the Indigenous and it's part of the calls to do so.'

Chambers' installation is unique in that she builds it in the space she is given and never knows exactly what it will be until it's underway, but the focus is always on connection and education around the Indigenous struggle in Canada.

'Originally, it was based around dealing with reconnection with friends and family and community after COVID, but before I did any installations, the 215 children were discovered in Kamloops,' she said. 'Everything changed at that point, and I had a hard time focusing the work just on reconnection because I felt there was a lack of any sort of tangible connection between settler Canadians and Indigenous, Inuit, and Métis. I was feeling like we want to connect but there's this massive void between those communities and I wanted to figure out how I could address that. So, it's essentially me trying to figure out how to break the distance between the communities.'

When creating an art installation based on her surroundings to reflect what the Canada's Indigenous people have gone through, Chambers says it's very dependent on where she is when it comes to the way she goes about creating.

'It depends on the location because I react to the space,' she said. 'Some places are really negative, which makes it difficult to do, like residential schools. When I'm doing it at an art gallery there's often very little Indigenous content, so I find with those ones I can be even more aggressive with it because it's further decolonizing that space. I think with the Peel gallery it will be something that ends up being very community centric, but some places it's very intense what I do because there's no Indigenous culture.'

The purpose of her pieces is to not only educate non-Indigenous Canadians, but to reach those who may not be having the

conversations that are required to help in the healing process and connect communities together.

?What's great is most the places put a plaque to explain what the installation is about, so even if I'm not there to have the conversation, they're still seeing the work and the information and putting those things together,? she said. ?So, the conversation may not be happening literally, but it's happening figuratively, and that conversation is such an important part of it. People look at it through different lenses and I want to reach the people who may not be thinking critically about this and already having those conversations. Even new Canadians don't have a lot of experience with what has happened in Canada, so that's a great conversation to have, too.

Though both installations do coincide with National Truth and Reconciliation Day, PAMA had wanted to feature both artists for some time to help in educating non-Indigenous while promoting Indigenous creators, and it just worked out that they could book the artists for this month.

?Often our art gallery curators seek out artists of interest to them and PAMA always wants to display and promote Indigenous and diverse content to the Region,? said Erin Fernandes, PAMA Marketing Coordinator. ?Katherine was somebody our curator wanted to promote, and we just loved her piece so much. One of our programming specialists had Tracey-Mae's work catch her eye and we wanted to get onto her circuit for Hope and Healing and it just so happens we booked her for National Truth and Reconciliation Day. Both of them were fate moments that worked out perfectly in terms of promoting their messages of Indigenous education and hope and healing.?

Part of PAMA's mandate is to ensure that everybody in the Peel community is represented and having Indigenous artists involved with the gallery has long been something they're passionate about, it also allowed them to bring something important to the Region while they're not able to operate in regular fashion due to COVID.

?We are still closed so we've been exploring what we could do on the outside of our building as people walk by or people are online virtually,? said Fernandes. ?We've been focusing on what we can do to get the public's attention and put important content out there. In the Region of Peel, we have such a diverse population that we have made a commitment to create content in which people can see [themselves] reflected, so it's a hugely important part of who we are to have not only Indigenous exhibits, but other diverse groups as well. We try to reach out to different communities as much as possible to tell their stories.?