

Works of Mendelson Joe will be displayed at Bartlett Gallery

The Bartlett Gallery will be presenting Out of the Cage, an exhibition of 25 paintings by Canadian artistic, social justice advocate and man-on-the-periphery Mendelson Joe.

The show will run from March 26 to April 20, with an opening reception March 30 from 1 to 4 p.m.

Those familiar with Joe lore know he taught himself to paint in 1975, after plucking a box of discarded acrylics from a Toronto garbage bin. And, like the pointed social critiques that saturate the music he made throughout the last several decades, he is famous for portraits that mock politicians and revere cultural luminaries, poking and provoking the Canadian consciousness with images of rump-faced prime ministers and the nearly 300 portraits in his compelling tribute series Working Women.

He is, however, a man of two preoccupations, and Out of the Cage is an exhibition that will showcase a softer side of Joe.

This collection of new landscape paintings reflect what he called an "obsession with natural beauty." These are the northern Ontario scenes that balm his soul.

Joe is a figure quick to name both his anger and his capacity for hope.

"Hope is," he said, "all I've got for this much-ravaged planet, the true mother of all life to which many of us refer as Mother Earth or Mother Nature. So, the spine of my inspiration that keeps me vital to create is hope."

In the introduction to the 2012 ECW Press publication Joe's Ontario, Sotheby's Canada president David P. Silcox put it thus: "Even with his awareness of . . . humanity's less noble characteristics, (Joe) still comes to landscape art and Mother Nature with the innocence and wonder of a six- or seven-year-old child."

Joe's landscapes are social commentary of a different kind: expressions of awe for the raw power and gentle purity of nature, and a reminder of all that's at stake when "human meddling" encroaches too far.

Joe has been called "the quintessential Canadian outsider artist," a "famous recluse" and a "one-man passion-play."

Since 2000, he has elected to live and to create in the northern Ontario landscape that has long been an antidote to his anger. Like Tom Thomson before him, he sojourned north to paint Muskokan landscapes in Algonquin Park before leaving Toronto permanently for his cabin in the Almaguin Highlands. From there, he pens letters to Parliament, records music and paints his portraits and landscapes "all endeavours that reflect his mixed sentiment in The Canada Song: 'I've heard the news and I've got the blues' and yet, 'it's so nice to be right here in Canada.'"

Joe has attached titles like "Respite" and "Therapy" and "A Reason to Live" to canvases that capture ice breaking on lake water at night; the otherworldly colours of a summertime sunset; the radiant reds and greens of early fall. This is homage to the stuff "the rocks, water and trees" that heals him. Silcox called Joe's landscapes "real in the way dreams are real."

Like his portraits, they are recognizable, altered to reflect the way Joe sees and feels and thinks about what he is witnessing.

During the March 30 reception, guests will have a very rare chance to connect with the artist himself. At 3 p.m., Joe will call in, via Skype. In his own writing about his landscapes, Joe calls out: "Come and witness my heavens."

The Bartlett Gallery is at the Alton Mill Arts Centre, 1402 Queen St. in Alton.

Rick Mercer once said, "When Mendelson Joe calls, you answer."