

COVID-19 inspires local artists



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By Michael RileyLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter

COVID-19 has had a lot of effects on our way of life over the past several months. Much of it has been negative, but there are some positive elements to emerge from this pandemic. Many artists of all disciplines have found renewed inspiration and a creative muse from these trying times, many of them living here in Bancroft and the surrounding area. These artists share their stories of how the virus has changed the way they conceive of, create and exhibit their art during these trying times. Although originally hailing from Toronto, Saidie MacDonald is a self-taught potter who now calls Bird's Creek home. She has been a potter since 1973, and feels that her personal connection with the clay has allowed her to discover her creative voice. Her pottery has always taken nature, life's journey, feelings and emotions as inspiration, but the pandemic has prompted her to do a lot of soul searching to find a new connection to her work and to revisit her initial reasons for becoming a potter 47 years ago. "Much to my surprise, I have found this pandemic time that we are in a very positive experience for me as both an artist and a person. Having more time to work in my flower, herb and vegetable gardens, I have reconnected deeper to my need to not only work with my hands in the soil but to express my deep connections to Mother Earth and nature in my clay creations. My reasons for becoming a potter so many years ago and even my work now still reflects my desire and need to express the natural world through clay. The difference is that I am now more conscious of my connections to nature and my newest works depicting flowers, bumble bees, leaves, etc. express a renewed appreciation and heightened awareness of the natural world," she says. Carol Westcott is an award-winning painter who is a frequent visitor to North Hastings to inspire her work. She has also been a guest artist at painter Laura Culic's studio in Maynooth, has exhibited her work in local galleries and has been part of the Bancroft and Area Studio Tour for several years. Her work has been exhibited at numerous solo and group shows across Canada and around the world. Several of her paintings are now in the Government of Ontario Art Collection. Her paintings focus on landscapes and the natural environment and the beauty of urban-scapes that may get passed by most of the time without notice. Her work can be found at www.carolwestcott.ca. She says she hasn't actually thought of it as "pandemic art" but she has been doing some new work over the past few weeks. "Mostly it's inspired by the landscapes I haven't seen for a while. Northern and eastern Ontario landscapes traditionally make their way into my work. The subject matter has continuing appeal for me. And recollections of swampy lowlands, familiar creeks, rivers and rugged woodlands are positive images that motivate and inspire me. Before, during and hopefully after the COVID-19 pandemic," she says. Kathy Figueroa is a poet, playwright, writer, book publisher and photographer from Bancroft. She founded the Poets' Society of Hasting County North in 2010, and was the poetry editor of the Quinte Arts Council publication Umbrella from 2017-2019. She has written some poetry with pandemic themes over the past few months, which have appeared on the Guernsey Poets blog. Figueroa says her poem, "A Cup of Tea," was written early in the year, before COVID-19 became international news. "I wrote it in response to the tense situations that heralded the start of 2020, and included it as a 'pre pandemic poem' which gives an indication of the

troubled events taking place on the world stage in early January, 2020," she says. She has also written five pandemic haiku, which she has labelled panku, that appeared last month in Devour: Art and Literature Canada. One of her latest pandemic poems was written in April, 2020, and calls for respecting and protecting our world, not destroying it with our insatiable financial appetites. It is called This Ecosphere; Bow to the might of the Pangolin and Bat Leave them undisturbed in their wild habitat Tremble before Creation in its glory Know that Humans are but part of its story Instead of plundering to ruination Let Humans protect this wondrous creation This ecosphere, this world, this garden in space This most marvelous home of the human race Nancy McKinnon is a painter that lives near Baptiste Lake in Bancroft. She is known for her landscapes and wildlife paintings in oils and acrylics. She has been attracted to art since her early days growing up in Hamilton. A painting course with Mary Wallace reignited her passion for using the brush and canvas, and upon retiring to Highland Grove in 2011 she began painting again with renewed vigour. With the pandemic, she says she has been painting a lot every day. "Because of the quarantine, I feel I have more time to create works that I truly love. I have also been painting more with oils. These take longer to dry and I do have time for that now. The oil colours are spectacular. I also have been fulfilling a few requests," she says. You can check out her work at www.rockwoodartstudio.com Retiring as a full-time nurse last year, Bancroft's Karen Istead is a glass artist who uses fused and stained-glass techniques to convey the light that reflects upon the natural environment of North Hastings. She sees artists in the area having a struggle to exhibit and sell their art this year. "The studio tour that takes me a year to prepare for has been cancelled for this year. I walked away from my glass art in March when the pandemic rose its ugly head. I went into protective mode with my parents, aged 87, and myself with health risks. I literally just walked away from it and returned a couple of weeks ago. New ideas and a fresh view waiting to take shape in the fused glass that I do. Plan is to create and reap the wealth of satisfaction that working with glass gives me," she says. Istead says she'll be looking at other ways to show her work, such as Facebook displays and through galleries and perhaps starting up a website. Her work can currently be seen on her Facebook page, Karen Istead Glass Artist. John Olesen is a woodturning artist who lives in L'Amable. He has done woodturning for 30 years as his normal creative outlet, and his work ranges from hollow forms, bowls and platters to more decorative items. He uses local and imported wood, and says he prefers working with wood from Australia. He has also experimented with micro photography. "However, when the pandemic began and all things seemed to change, I decided to try an additional path and started doing abstract art. I had never really done much painting before but I just wanted something vibrant and colourful and perhaps more chaotic like the world around me. The images I frequently see of the virus itself, the circular shape with multi-colours and strange shaped hooks may have been the trigger to create abstract art. The virus itself contains beauty and has an eerie and alien presence. Abstract art provides images that relate to the viewer. Different people as I discovered see images from their own perspective," he says. His new art endeavors are done with acrylics, paint thinners, mica flecks and latex using a variety of artist created techniques. His work is on display at his studio and on his Facebook page, John Olesen. Margo Merritt is a stained-glass artist in Maynooth. She has also done alcohol ink painting since taking a course from fellow artist Jane Monteith. She uses the natural world around her as her muse, has participated several times in the Bancroft Studio Tour and her work is regularly on display at the Wildewood Gallery in Maynooth. You can also see her work in both mediums on her Facebook page, MargoMerrittsArt. She says she has been one of the lucky ones not to have had to stay home during the pandemic from her "day job." "I work at one of the Hastings Highlands waste sites and between doing my regular hours and our annual spring clean up of all the waste sites I have been working six days a week. There's not much time left to get into my groove for my stained glass. It requires a lot of standing and after work the last thing I want is to stand for another few hours. But having said that my time is spent coming up with ideas for the work I'm going to be doing. My brain is on overload with going to work and making sure people keep their distance from me and then coming home and being able to relax then I'm in thinking mode and that doesn't seem to want to stop. That's a good thing till it's time to sleep. The one good thing is when I'm doodling my thoughts it keeps me from worrying about the virus and the possibility of bringing it home from work to my husband. I do all I can to stay safe so that I can continue to do my art," she says. Laura Culic is an award-winning painter and art teacher from Maynooth who does contemporary Algonquin inspired paintings in oil and wax. Her work is heavily influenced by the natural world around her. Many corporate, private and government collections include her work, and she is an elected member of the Ontario Society of Artists. She says the pandemic has definitely influenced her art. "For one, the galleries who represent me have been closed, most of them just temporarily. Art fairs have been cancelled as well, so during this period there has been very little opportunity for sales, or prospects of venues to look forward to for exhibiting or selling my work. This has impacted me creatively; in that it has actually provided an opportunity for greater exploration and experimentation. I've been highly productive and have experienced a time of deep focus on process, almost a meditative sort of state. Without the constraint of needing to produce work for a particular purpose, I have felt a sense of immersion in creativity and freedom. Culic says the other interesting aspect she has experienced is that with COVID-19 restrictions necessitating isolation and precluding travel, she has done a lot of figurative and imaginative journeying within her work. "My work,

whether representational or abstract, is inspired by the landscape, as well as by maps. Mapping has played a significant part in the creation of my body of work during isolation,? she says. While she admits that quarantine has been challenging and life altering, she is grateful to have the creative outlet of her painting to provide her solace. You can view her work at www.lauraculic.com?[My art] has provided me with an opportunity to adventure into new terrain, with the mind of an explorer, not certain the best routes or means, but open to all possibilities,? she says.