

Algonquin artist expresses spirituality in art



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By Nate Smelle

Since COVID-19 began wreaking havoc in Ontario Algonquin artist Sherry Crawford has been even busier than usual creating. Although the pandemic did cause her to cancel a show planned in April at the Georgina Arts Centre in Sutton, Crawford recently came up with a way for people to enjoy her art while maintaining physical distance ? a drive-thru art exhibit. Last week, Crawford set up 40 of her paintings outdoors in the parking lot of St. John's Church in Cavan. The show went so well, and people appreciated the unique opportunity to experience her art so much, she is now planning to bring her exhibit to Bancroft. Crawford first began pursuing a career in the arts 10 years ago, after she was encouraged by the owner of an art gallery in Cobourg who saw her work, to paint more, and to give painting portraits a shot. Looking back, she said she chose ?the most challenging subject for a first portrait possible? ? an Indigenous elder dressed in his full regalia. When Crawford first picked up her paint brushes, she worked primarily in oil, however, now she works mostly in acrylics. Having created some 2,000 pieces in her career ? some of which were painted using a computer mouse as a digital paintbrush ? Crawford has developed a uniquely diverse style. Describing where her inspiration has been coming from lately, Crawford said ?I have been having a lot of fun, and learning, and meeting a lot of amazing people. I have

been getting a little more into politics this year, just because the more I learn the more outraged I become that we have been lied to and misled for so many years. I didn't even know who I was. So I am really hoping that the changing times will start to turn things around for the better, because there definitely needs to be some big changes. While Crawford finds great inspiration and hope in people working to end systemic racism through the demonstrations and rail blockades in support of the Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs' fight to protect their traditional territory, and the Black Lives Matter movement, she describes her art as more spiritual than political. For example in her painting entitled, 'Strawberry Moon' Crawford said she has expressed her impression of the entire life cycle. Using black acrylic paint on a blue background, she said the painting shows how the clouds connect to the trees and the trees connect to the earth. Crawford said the trees, which she said are identified as 'Standing People' in her culture also represent how we are all interconnected throughout the four stages of life. Having previously turned to religion for answers regarding the 'big question' of 'why we are here,' Crawford said it was through connecting with her heritage as a Kijicho Manito Madaouskarini Algonquin woman that she found the answers she was looking for. She said she really began to connect with her own sense of spirituality after she participated in a Shake Tent Ceremony at which she was given the name White Bear Standing. Since this time, Crawford said she has been following The Good Red Road by practicing the Seven Grandfather Teachings of love, respect, truth, wisdom, honesty, bravery, and humility. Explaining how her spiritual understanding has evolved over the past 20 years, Crawford said 'A lot of people turn to religion, because they say 'I want to know, did God put me here, am I a monkey.' I couldn't find the right answers from religious groups since every time I would ask a question I would get a quote from a bible. But that's not answering my question. Ultimately it does come down to that I do believe there is a Creator. You can call them God, or Buddha, or Jesus, or Allah, or whatever you want, but I believe there is that power, that energy source. It's almost like a rainstorm, where we rain down in individual droplets into a lake. And we all become a part of that lake when we go back to the Creator.' Recognizing how the world is changing because of the pandemic, Crawford said she sees that many people seem to be awakening to a higher understanding of 'what's important and what's not.' With so many people off work and spending more time with their family, Crawford said COVID-19 has helped inspire this greater awareness of value by allowing people to reconnect with each other in new ways. 'A lot of parents work so hard and they hardly see their kids because they are at day care; and now, 'boom' they are in their face 24/7 so they are really getting to know their kids,' said Crawford. 'The sad part is that we hear all the time how we are all in this together, but nothing has really changed. Poor people are only worse off now, the middle class are suffering a little bit more, and the rich - well, they probably aren't suffering at all. But, with the people on reserves that don't even have clean water, when the main thing they are telling us is to wash our hands, it's a bit ridiculous. Hopefully people will start to see that when someone else is hurting, I'm hurting.' To learn more about Crawford and view her work, visit her Facebook page, and website at: www.jamesfineartcollection.com.