

Art Gallery of Bancroft reopening on June 18

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By Michael RileyLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter

Great news for all the art lovers in town. The Art Gallery of Bancroft will be unlocking its doors to the public on June 18. During an online meeting on May 27, the directors of the Art Gallery approved its reopening on a trial basis. From June 18 to Aug. 2, it will be open Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Restrictions will be in place including physical distancing and limiting the number of people to five allowed in the gallery at one time.

The first artist to be shown when the gallery reopens is Allan O'Marra, with his exhibition 'Recent Figurative Works.' His works feature individuals and groups in nature, water activities and in interiors. O'Marra has had a varied work experience in addition to his fine art. In his nearly 50-year career, he has had 39 solo fine art exhibits and participated in over 100 group shows. Many private and corporate collections carry O'Marra's work.

Born in Domville, Ontario, O'Marra's primary and secondary school education was completed in Bancroft. He began studying at the Ontario College of Art and Design at the University of Toronto in 1967 and graduated from their Communications and Design course in 1971. He worked a variety of promotions and advertising jobs in the Toronto area for many years.

Currently he teaches art for the Pickering Recreation Department and volunteers to teach art at the Ontario Shores Mental Health Centre in Whitby. He writes, paints and offers psychotherapy sessions from his home studio in Ajax. He has also worked as an art exhibition jurist and curator and an art columnist.

O'Marra says the upcoming show was booked at the end of last summer and he worked very hard in preparing the art work over the intervening months.

'Then in April, I was advised by the gallery director that it was being cancelled because of the pandemic and would be rescheduled for July 2021. Even though I completely understood and supported the closing of the gallery, it was still hugely disappointing to realize I would have to now wait for more than a year to hang the show. However, as the pandemic unfolded over the intervening months, several weeks ago it appeared that Ontario would be opening up to limited events in places like art galleries. So, I contacted the director and asked him if I might proceed with my show with the mandatory protocols in place. He consulted with the gallery council and permission was granted. I am thrilled of course, that I am now having the opportunity to show the work, and for the fans of the gallery to come out and see it, even in restricted circumstances of attendance and social distancing protocols,' he says.

O'Marra admits to being a flat-out extrovert and an art teacher, so he loves connecting with art patrons and talking about his work with them. He says he'll be greeting visitors to the show on Saturdays from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. from June 20 until the last Saturday of the show on August 1. He said he'll also be working on a painting during that time, so people can see his artistic process. According to O'Marra, he applies for a show every three years at the AGB as per their guidelines and has been granted a show four times in the last 12 years.

'Some of the figurative works in this present show date back to 2017, there are several from 2018, but the majority were created in the past year up to the present. Each of the medium-sized canvases takes me approximately 60 hours to paint over the course of three weeks. However, the largest one I will be displaying 'Family Reunion, 2005' took 200 hours during the months of November and December 2019. I really like 'Canoeing with Isabelle' as well! Thus, it was chosen as the image I used to promote the show,' he says.

O'Marra says the reference image for 'Canoeing with Isabelle' is a photo he shot of a friend with whom he was canoeing on the lake in the local Maxwell Settlement, when she was attending a weekend art workshop he was conducting several years ago at his art

retreat/original homestead, the vintage schoolhouse in the community.

?I think people are really going to enjoy the fact that the majority of the works in the show are Bancroft area based. For example, images of my family from some years back, present images featuring the lake and the locale of Maxwell Settlement and even drawings of a local public-school class and an underground uranium mine scene,? he says.

Hugh Monteith is the president of the Art Gallery of Bancroft, and says that like most organizations that have been closed due to the virus pandemic, they are both relieved and excited to be open again.

?Unfortunately, we were required to terminate our March exhibition with Peterborough sculptor Michael Nathaniel Green halfway through his show, and our scheduled exhibitions for April, May and June have been deferred until 2021. That being said, we look forward to continuing with the balance of our show schedule barring other unforeseen circumstances. We encourage our members and visitors to return to the gallery to view our opening exhibition and some new additions to our Gallery shop,? he says.

Monteith says the gallery's volunteers have been very busy in the past two weeks ensuring the safety of volunteers and gallery members. They have applied floor markers to promote physical distancing, a limit of five visitors at a time in the gallery, hand sanitizer and optional face masks at the door, the desk area has been reorganized to provide a safe distance between volunteers and the public, a new payment machine with a longer cord has been purchased to have contactless payment, a plastic shield has been installed at the desk counter, credit and debit are the only forms of payment accepted, public washrooms are closed to the public and the opening reception for Allan O'Marra's show has been cancelled due to physical distancing requirements.

Since the Art Gallery of Bancroft has announced its reopening on June 18, they haven't yet received a lot of feedback, according to Monteith. Based upon recent visitor surveys they have conducted at the gallery however, they think there will be a positive reception this coming summer season, especially by cottagers as they return to the area.

?It's a sad reality for us that, as with many other small businesses and organizations, our viability is dependent on the reception we receive from the public. Without the support of our community, our 37 years of providing the primary artistic outlet in Bancroft is jeopardized. Imagine a Bancroft without the Art Gallery of Bancroft. Horrible to contemplate, but without the interest of artists and non-artists alike, it could happen. And that would be a shame,? he says.

Monteith says the gallery is really pleased to be hosting Allan O'Marra and his exhibit on June 18.

?Allan grew up in the Bancroft area and has quite a local following. He was the first-place winner in our 37th annual Juried Show this past December and January in the still life category. Allan's portraits of figures are exceptional, whether sole figures or larger groups of people together,? he says. ?I think visitors to the exhibition will be highly impressed by his ability to capture the expressions of his figures in his paintings.?