

Come close to meeting a former PM at AGB

The Art Gallery of Bancroft is planning to start 2017 historically. This year being the 150th birthday of Canada, Sir John A. Macdonald will be attending the gallery to kick off the first exhibition of the year in the newly renovated gallery.

While the real John A. Macdonald is no longer with us, artist Gesina Laird-Buchanan's life-size sculpture of Macdonald will be at the gallery along with life-size sculptures of Emily Carr and Tommy Thomson. The retrospective exhibition *Studio Gesina* will feature these sculptures in addition to others created by the artist through a process called wool-felting. Wool from sheep is shorn, washed and then many hours are spent with a felting needle poking at a handful of the wool so that the wool fibres grab together making the material denser and solid. The wool becomes felt. Macdonald's beard, for example, takes less poking to achieve its mass than his hands. The denser the part, the more poking. According to the artist, the process can take forever, but she wouldn't be doing it if she didn't love it.

?I just start with a handful of wool and I start creating and basically it's just what occurs. It talks to me. Then finally you look at it and, whoa OK, that's who you were meant to be. There is a point in the creation where you look into their eyes and you know that's it,? said Laird-Buchanan.

Even her life-sized figures, which require a lot of planning and take over four months to complete take on a form that the artist says she couldn't have foreseen.

Living in a century-old house in the downtown Napanee, Laird-Buchanan never considered raising sheep for wool until her friend Judy Hatton, who has her own sheep on her farm outside of Coe Hill, suggested she get a sheep on the Hatton farm. So six years ago a Shetland sheep named Shelly got her started.

Laird-Buchanan loves the particular wool from Shetlands; ?It is wonderful, it felts extremely well and comes in a wide variety of colours from a gray to a black, a white, a brown.?

Laird-Buchanan became interested in wool-felting about six years ago when she saw an exhibition of fibre arts at the museum in Napanee. Among the examples of spinning, knitting, weaving, a small figure made of wool caught her attention. She knew it was made of wool but she says ?for the life of me, I couldn't figure out how it was done.? The gallery attendant explained it was wool-felting but it wasn't until she bought a felting needle and started to experiment that she knew how needle-felting worked and how much she loved doing it.

For the last 20 years of her career in education, Laird-Buchanan taught art at North Hastings High School in Bancroft. This retrospective of her work will include paintings of local old churches done while living in the area, ?the small old churches, the ones in the back, in the bush.? She enjoys the idea of taking the work back to area it was painted. The churches and the historical figures illustrate the artist's inspiration from history.

?I was fascinated by the churches and I hate to see them disappearing and so many have disappeared. They tend to be wonderful pieces of architecture and the historical figures.? Part of the joy in creating her work is her subjects and ?making them come to life again.?

Laird-Buchanan's fascination with history stays close to home. When not being exhibited, Macdonald and Carr sit by her fireplace in her Napanee home, while Thomson is in the back room -? he needs the space, he comes with a canoe made from a salvaged old cedar strip canoe that was repaired and fixed so he can sit upright. The most flexible part of the historical figures are the hands which are made so they can hold objects: Carr, paint brushes; Thomson, a paddle; and Macdonald, a drink.

The AGB is starting 2017 with celebration, with history, with another look at fibre arts and continued focus on art created locally by local artists. Anyone interested in any of these and anyone interested in meeting the artist and being inspired by her creativity and work are invited to the opening. The exhibition will be up in the gallery until Feb. 25.

Studio Gesina will open with a reception on Saturday, Jan. 14 at 2 p.m. Laird-Buchanan's creating sculpture from wool workshop will be held on Feb. 12, 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. Participants will be creating small sculptures with wool and wire (materials provided). Also at the workshop, shepherdess Judy Hatton will be talking about the shearing, cleaning and dyeing of the wool with the support of a slideshow. Fee: \$65, Seating limited. Materials provided.

Submitted by Roy Mitchell