

Indigenous artist discusses inspiration, upcoming exhibitions



By Bill Kilpatrick

It's been a busy autumn for Indigenous artist Sherry Crawford, who also goes by the name White Bear Standing. After three separate art exhibitions in September, which included a solo show in Port Perry, a juried exhibition at the Colbourne art Gallery, and the Truth and Reconciliation exhibition at the Art Gallery of Bancroft, her piece entitled Purple Paradise, has been chosen to be showcased in Toronto's Cavalcade of Lights from Nov. 25 to Jan. 7 in Nathan Phillips Square. The Cavalcade of Lights, according to the City of Toronto's webpage, was "Inspired by international lantern, fire and light festivals and winter solstice celebrations, Cavalcade of Lights is a free event that transforms City Hall and its surrounds into a dazzling wonderland." Crawford was "thrilled" by the news that her piece was chosen to be part of such a prestigious event. This will be the second time that her creation, Purple Paradise, will be displayed for the public. The first exhibition occurred in February at the Lunar Fest Celebration that was held at the Frederick S. Varley Art Gallery in Markham, Ontario and according to Crawford, "it received rave reviews from visitors and critics alike." Purple Paradise is a six-foot-tall lantern that is decorated with a purple hummingbird, or as Crawford calls it a "mini thunderbird," that is surrounded by stars and flowers. Crawford said that she chose the hummingbird specifically because it "represents strength, courage, and healing, while the purple color symbolizes spirituality, creativity, and harmony." For Crawford this piece was not done in her usual style as she wanted to experiment with something different, "That was a digital piece that I created on my iPad using a program called Pro-Creato," said Crawford adding that, "I wanted to experiment with different colours, brushes, [and use] a whole different technique." Crawford says she, "hopes that her lantern will inspire people to appreciate the beauty and diversity of nature and culture," adding that she wants, "to share my vision of a purple paradise, where everyone can live in peace and harmony with themselves, each other, and the environment. I hope that my lantern will bring joy and light to the people

who see it, especially during these dark and challenging times. Crawford has always loved art and recalls making drawings in the sand while at the beach and in the gravel pit near her childhood home by Anderson Lake in Paudash. While she has always loved art and nature, where she draws much of her inspiration, she did not consider herself an artist until she met the owner of the Tom Thomas Native Art Museum in 2010. Crawford had taken some of her ink drawings to the museum to show the owner and the owner was impressed, "She [the owner] looked at them and thought they were amazing," recalled Crawford, adding that owner encouraged her to begin painting them on canvas, but also told her that she need to paint portraits. So, Crawford tried painting portraits and doing hand-drawn pencil portraits and digital portraits, but it wasn't until she took the curator's advice in the last few years and began painting her ink drawings that she found her real passion. "Now that's basically all I do," said Crawford, "and I just love how the [Indigenous] teachings are all just coming out [in my creations]." Crawford not only considers herself an artist, but also describes herself as "a passionate advocate for indigenous rights, environmental protection, and social justice," according to her press release. Her teachings not only come out in her art, but her passion for Indigenous rights has further led to a passion for education. Crawford teaches art classes where she also incorporates Indigenous teachings, such as the Seven Grandfather Teachings and Medicine Wheel directions. Crawford also uses a visual demonstration called the Circle of Stones to help people learn about and understand the impact that residential schools had, and continues to have, on Indigenous culture. In an interview with Say Magazine in February, Crawford said that the Circle of Stones teachings, "visually demonstrates what colonization and residential schools did to our communities. When you see it, you feel it, and then you get it. There's just something about seeing a visual demonstration that really sinks in for people," explained Crawford. Crawford does not consider herself a starving artist, but rather an artist who is starving for time. She explained that art is her passion, but it does not always pay the bills, so she continues to work 40 hours per week while balancing all the time demands that come with her family, her social media pages, her art and her activism. "It's so much fun and I love it," said Crawford, "I just need more time to do it." Crawford was not complaining about all the time demands that she has to balance however, stating that she is grateful for all that she has, including her workload which, because it is her choice, makes it bearable and enjoyable. "I accept my choices, that's the big thing," said Crawford, "I understand that it doesn't matter what I choose as long as I accept it in my mind and my heart [and once you do that] then you can do anything." Although she accepts her choices she still would love nothing more than to do her art full-time and to one day open a retail store in the Bancroft area that is similar to the Whetung Gallery located on the reserve at Curve Lake. Her vision is an ambitious one that involves selling authentic Indigenous arts and crafts, economic development, cultural teachings, partnerships, and teachings about art and about the territory on which she was raised. However, until she makes that choice she remains thankful for the chance to exhibit her art all across Ontario, teach about traditional Algonquin culture, and to just enjoy nature. Sherry Crawford is a member of the Kijicho Manito Madaouskarini Algonquin First Nation, the Indigenous Arts Collective of Canada, and the Ontario Society of Artists. Although she grew up in the Bancroft area she currently lives and works in Millbrook, Cavan Monaghan. To learn more about Crawford you can visit: <https://www.jamesfineartcollection.com/>