

Two Spirits visit Wildewood Gallery

By Sarah Sobanski

The next show at Maynooth's Wildewood Gallery pays homage to Indigenous culture with canvases that explore the spirituality and soul through self-taught harmonious artist techniques.

Welcoming artists Ken Balmer and Ren Lonechild, Wildewood presents show Two Spirits. It opened Sept. 8 in Maynooth.

Balmer has been painting for over 45 years. While he now spends his summers with his partner near Algonquin Park, he's lived all over North America including Calgary, the West Coast and Arizona. His travels have been driven by his search and fascination with Orenda ? the Iroquois name for the supernatural force within all things. He defines it as the spiritual driver for human accomplishment.

?I paint things that reflect where I am. So in Vancouver it was eagles, whales, landscapes and First Nations chiefs. Down south it tends to be southwestern animals and native dancers. Up here it's a no brainer on the edge of Algonquin Park that people are here to see wildlife so I paint wildlife,? said Balmer. ?I've always been motivated by a search for spirituality in all its forms. I've been painting for the last couple years, pictures of people in prayer, so expressing their spirituality. The native dancers are basically praying through their feet.?

Over his artistic growth, Balmer has also painted hawks, eagles, First Nations elders, southwestern native American dancers, Peyote drummers, West Coast totems, sacred landscapes and other places the force might be. Balmer has five paintings in the gallery show. Each is an animal and his exploration into their spirit and Orenda.

?These animals are just all about trying to capture their spirit, which is all about survival and just getting along,? said Balmer. ?One of the reasons I paint is there's no better way to tune into something, whether it's a landscape or a person's spirituality or dance or in this case an animal than by spending hours with it and trying to capture the essence of what it is. I'm not sure I know what the essence is. That's what I'm looking for.?

He added, ?One of the hawks, I called it Intent. You can tell by looking at it that it's absolutely focused. It's a survival thing. If it does well, it's going to eat and be OK. Another is a heron and he's standing in a water scene. I've called it Watchful, and he's just on guard. It's trying to capture the essence of what the animal is feeling or focused on at that particular moment because it's all about survival. That's how it goes back to Orenda, the spirit that keeps them alive.?

The 70-year-old paints between his work as a consultant with the Rethink Group. He has a doctorate in geography and planning.

?For the last 20 years I've been working half-time ? half-time consulting, half-time available for adventure and painting,? said Balmer.

Balmer has never had formal training but he has worked with a number of painting professionals learning and honing his painting style. He said he's picked up techniques by looking at other artists' works and perfecting his version of their styles.

?The reason I never wanted formal training is that I took formal training in music. It was painful. I was a concert pianist. I played the French horn. It was painful when I realized that I wasn't actually musical,? explained Balmer. ?I was a technician. I could work hard and sound really great, but other people could just play.?

Balmer didn't want to have the same experience with painting. Rather than formal training he developed a style over his journey to understanding and capturing Orenda.

?I get lost when I'm painting, it's like meditation,? sai Balmer. He continues to search for Orenda.

From muse to maker

By Sarah Vance

Ren Lonechild describes himself as a continuously evolving, self--taught artist. He showed his work alongside Balmer Thursday.

Born near White Bear First Nations Reservation, in Carlyle Sask., Lonechild's Plains Cree heritage is embedded throughout his work.

For the opening at Wildewood Gallery he tried his hand at acrylic painting, a relatively new genre for the artist who frequently blends his subjects using pencil and fine-tip markers.

Elders figure as a prominent theme in Lonechild's oeuvre including a painting called Kokum (which means grandmother in Cree). This painting sold online, in less than 12 hours, while the paint was still wet on the canvas.

Animals such as buffalo, wolves and ravens, are also recurring images which Lonechild uses to draw out themes of personal struggle, spirituality and isolation.

Lonechild spent his teenage years reading comic books, an influence which figures prominently when he designs album covers for musicians, posters and t-shirts. Some of his work bears the mark of Canadian icon Michael Lonechild, whose paintings are internationally renowned, and who is also Ren's father.

As a child Ren remembers posing for Michael, who would often involve his children in his paintings and who would show them how to care for palettes and brushes.

"I grew up watching my father work, as a child, watching him paint," said Ren. "I would pore through his sketchbooks, watching how he drew figures. He is an influence."

Ren moved to the Highlands in his teenage years and attended North Hastings High School. He has since returned to Maynooth, where he is supported by a network of friends, family and patrons who are pleased to welcome him back to his other home, in Ontario.

By Labour Day weekend more than 50 per cent of Lonechild's work on display at Wildewood had already been sold, but rumour has it there will be more pieces unveiled by the opening of *Two Spirits*.

Ren uses social media such as Facebook and Twitter to promote his work, and a virtual gallery can be found under the name Renz Creations.