

Brownstein: Serving Indigenous communities with Indigenous artworks

Gary Blair and Earl Pinchuk are bringing 14 Indigenous works to Aupaluk as part of their Art for Healing Foundation's mandate to make art accessible to all.

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Earl Pinchuk, left, and Gary Blair's Art for Healing Foundation aims to set up "mini-wellness museums all over the country," Blair says. Their latest project involves the installation of 14 pieces of Indigenous art in the new CLSC in the Nunavik community of Aupaluk. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

A ceremony is being held Monday in the new CLSC in the small community of Aupaluk, in the Far North region of Nunavik. The town's entire population of 225 people is invited to attend the unveiling of 14 pieces of Indigenous art.

This is a project several years in the making for Montrealers Gary Blair and Earl Pinchuk, and it marks a high point in their quest to make art accessible to all.

Since 2002, Blair and Pinchuk have been at the helm of the non-profit Art for Healing Foundation; they receive high-end donated art from galleries, collectors and artists and place it in hospitals and seniors' residences across Canada — for free. Their goal is simple: to brighten up the lives of others by setting up, as Blair puts it, “mini-wellness museums all over the country.”

But while they have been highly successful in making inroads in some of the more remote regions of Canada, they felt they had to make more of an effort in serving Indigenous areas with Indigenous art.

“It really hit home for us after learning more and more about the residential school tragedies as the situation came to light,” Pinchuk says. “Indigenous people have been so kicked around so often throughout Canadian history, and their incredible art has been so often overlooked. Our mission has always been bringing Canadian art to Canadians, so we felt the time had come for us to bring Indigenous art to our Indigenous Peoples.”

To that end, Blair and Pinchuk contacted the office of then-minister for Indigenous services Marc Miller, requesting a list of Indigenous health-care centres throughout the country. From the list of 10 centres they received, they reached out to the Ungava Tulattavik Health Centre in Kuujuaq in the Nunavik region and proposed donating 14 Indigenous artworks that had been given to their foundation. The art was approved, and subsequently it was agreed to have it installed at the CLSC in Aupaluk.

“It’s a beautiful, beautiful building,” Blair says. “The architecture is so wonderfully designed with the aesthetic of the Indigenous culture.”

Blair and Pinchuk arrived in Aupaluk on Friday and spent the weekend putting up the art.

“Because of COVID, we were delayed for over a year in completing the mission, but we couldn’t be more overjoyed now,” Pinchuk says. “What’s so rewarding is that the community will not only find visual stimulation in the art, but also an educational element as well, with plaques next to each work detailing the artist and history of the work. It’s gratifying to know that the community will be able to take pride in its rich cultural heritage.”

The project has also been a huge learning experience for the pair.

“We’ve done as much research as we can on the culture, on the town, on the customs and traditions, in order to be respectful and mindful of the way Indigenous culture actually operates,” Blair says.

After consulting the foundation’s donor base in search of original Indigenous art, it didn’t take long to come up with several supporters willing to contribute artwork, with Mark London of Knowlton’s Galerie Elca London providing nine pieces.

Buoyed by the installation in the Aupaluk CLSC, the community has reached out to the Art for Healing Foundation to assemble two more projects in Kuujjuaq.

Neither Blair nor Pinchuk could have foreseen this movement mushrooming the way it has. It began simply enough in 2001 with the two — who both had successful careers — visiting a dying friend and art enthusiast in the Royal Victoria Hospital. They were dismayed by the lack of art on the hospital walls and pledged to rectify the situation.

And so they did a year later in launching the Art for Healing Foundation, collecting art and photos from prominent artists and benefactors and hanging them on the walls of hospitals, wellness centres and seniors' residences, mostly around Montreal. Donors were issued tax receipts. And the initiative proved hard to resist for recipients, in that the art was donated for free.

It didn't take long for word to spread. And what started with one hospital has snowballed to the point where the foundation has installed more than 14,000 pieces in 93 health-care institutions and seniors' residences in Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, B.C., Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador — and even in Paris and Nottingham, England.

Pinchuk, now retired, had always been well connected to the local art scene, which has proved invaluable in terms of not only tracking down interesting works, but also placing them in appropriate venues.

When not searching for and hanging art around the country, Blair runs and owns i24 Call Management Solutions.

“After 21 years, the foundation is stronger than ever,” Blair says. “But the reaction we’ve had so far from people having learned about our efforts to go to the Far North to bring Indigenous art has been stronger and more positive than anything we’ve done before. There is a groundswell out there among the non-Indigenous populations to do something to try to undo some of the damage that has been done.”

Adds Pinchuk: “It’s heartening to know that many non-Indigenous people are now feeling something toward Indigenous people that wasn’t felt as it should have been for far too long a time. It’s overdue.”

For information on the Art for Healing Foundation, visit artforhealingfoundation.org.

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