

Forget 1867 ? artists shine a light on the momentous 1917



By Brock Weir

As 2017 draws to a close, we have been inundated with celebrations and initiatives to mark 150 years since Confederation in 1867, but somewhat lost in the shuffle have been celebrations to mark another milestone year in Canadian history: 1917.

Ontario artists, however, are not going to let the anniversary go out like a lamb and have pooled their talents to shine a light on the centennial of the year that included decisive allied victories ? and hundreds of thousands of loses in the Battle of Passchendaele, a move towards full woman's suffrage, and the formation of the National Hockey League.

These tragedies and triumphs are currently immortalized in '1917 ? Canada Comes of Age: A Story Told In Visual Images,' now on through December 30 at the Aurora Cultural Centre.

The show and sale is a multi-artist exhibition curated by brothers Dave and Ross Rheume, history buffs both, who happened upon the 1917 idea when looking on a show to do together.

'In the rush for all these 150 events, one thing that was a bit overlooked was that 100 years ago Canada actually had a fairly significant year which represented, for a lot of people, Canada's coming of age,' says Dave.

With that in mind, they put out feelers to individuals in the artistic community who jumped at the chance to become a part of the collective. For some, the idea of infusing history into the work, was just outside their comfort zones, but each artist the brothers contacted had something very important in common: they are story tellers.

'The First World War really tends to predominate [the collected work] so we tried as much as possible to get other storylines in there as well,' says Dave. 'A large theme that emerged was the desire to tell the stories of people whose stories wouldn't otherwise have been heard. We have a lot about the participation of women in the war effort, the story from an Aboriginal artist whose grandfather was a much decorated veteran of the war. I have always been a bit of a history buff who loved the First World War, so I did one piece surrounding Passchendaele, but I am also a big hockey fan, so I thought I would do one painting around the NHL being born. I also did a piece on Mary Pickford because she was arguably the biggest female star at that time, leading the charge of Canadians going to Hollywood and achieving fame on an international scale.'

Although the Aurora Cultural Centre was the first gallery to book the exhibition since it was conceived last year, it made its debut at Ottawa's Byward Market and also had a stint at the Cailuan Gallery in Cornwall. As more people have taken in the exhibition, Dave says he is continually impressed how many people are interested in the individual story lines represented on the walls.

'History is often put aside a little bit, but these artists were all very keen,' he says. 'I sensed a real desire to connect with that earlier era and it is interesting to me how much a lot of the same things still come out; there was a lot of turmoil in their loves, a lot of sacrifice, fighting against injustices and, in some ways, the more things change the more thing stay the same.'

'People are thrilled that we're bringing these stories to life and we've had a lot of comments that this is something high schoolers should come to see. It is part of our history and our past, but it will always be an important year. It doesn't matter how many years go by, this will be the year a lot of people will say Canada really came of age.'