

In-person and virtual offerings from Cultural Centre as fall and winter programs line up

The jazz sounds of Barbra Lica rang out through the Aurora Armoury on Friday evening.

For music lovers, it was a welcome return to a degree of normalcy as the Aurora Cultural Centre hosted its first in-person concert of the season. For those still a bit wary of going out for an indoor performance, they could enjoy the music from the comforts of their own home. For the Cultural Centre, however, it was a return to their mandate.

"Our mission is really about bringing people together," says Suzanne Haines, Executive Director of the Aurora Cultural Centre. "The pandemic has been such a challenge [and] we really want the community to engage with art, artists and feel that creative energy. We see the transformation and the connection as they sit in the room [with the artist] and it is really significant that we can be back in person. The understanding of the shared experience one has when they are in a performance watching something live is all a big part of who we are as an organization and what we offer the community that is, perhaps, outside what others are able to offer and it is very important that it is maintained as part of our programming. The other side of this is the artists really want to perform in person and that part of their world has been taken away for so long. We are so honoured and grateful that we can offer this opportunity to give those artists a platform to give them a gig."

This hybrid model rolled out last Friday has served the Cultural Centre well since the early days of the pandemic, and will continue to do so for the time being, but there are pros and cons on both sides of the model.

Live-streaming a concert like Barbra Lica's is not a simple matter of setting up an iPhone camera and sending it out on social media. It is a professionally produced live-stream which comes at a cost.

"It is an expensive component," says Ms. Haines. "It's a question of what we can afford and what we can deliver. We offered some of our classes virtually when there was absolutely no other option. All of our in-person classes are sold out and our virtual classes are lightly populated. Learning art is, at least for our audience, much more appreciated in person.

"We are trying to be sensitive to that audience that really wants that in-person [experience] if they are ready to come out and see something live, and also provide a live-stream option for people who aren't yet ready to come out to a gathering space. I think we're still at that stage where there are people in both of those camps, we really respect that, and everyone has their own comfort level."

But in as much as the virtual element has opened live performances to broader audiences, it has been a necessary element for their visual arts program.

Since construction began on Aurora Town Square, visual art exhibitions offered by the Cultural Centre have been hosted on the second floor of Town Hall. The main drawback here, however, is Town Hall has been closed to visitors for the bulk of the pandemic, leaving art lovers with no other option than to explore artists' work virtually.

But that virtual element will be here to stay regardless of what COVID-19 next throws at us and local art lovers are already getting acquainted with the work of artist Emily Carriere, whose works of vinyl and acrylic have been installed on John West Way and filmed for everyone who can't come in to see it in person.

Entitled "Constellations", the exhibition, which runs through January 22, is not only beautiful and accessible, says Ms. Haines, it might give residents a few ideas for unique Christmas presents.

"I think people are going to really respond to it," says Ms. Haines of the exhibition. "We don't know at this time whether we can have in-person visits to the gallery, but everything is available online and most of the pieces will be for sale. This is an opportunity for people to get a piece of art at a time when they might not have been able to acquire something over the year. Because it is so

accessible, it might be something they will want to seek out for their holiday giving.?

Throughout the run of Constellations, ?art bites? will be offered online featuring Emily on her work.

Following the close of the exhibition at the end of January, the gallery won't be empty for long.

Local grade 12 students are working on pieces that will form the basis of the annual Mayor's Celebration of Youth Arts, which will run from the beginning of February through to the beginning of March, featuring both digital and virtual components.

?We have had some international audiences in our galleries participating in our events and we absolutely understand that that reach is really important,? says Ms. Haines on maintaining virtual elements for visual art. ?The technology we have invested in is allowing us to connect with audiences further afield and the art bites have been really successful also. This was already part of our strategic plan, so it was interesting when COVID hit and we looked at the plan and thought about what components we could do. The digital component was already there. We knew that investment was coming but it just came a little faster and a little more directly!?

For more on upcoming programs from the Aurora Cultural Centre, visit auroraculturalcentre.ca.

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