

Trio work in harmony to create At Odds

New exhibit a diverse array

By: Scott Hayes

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AT HOME – The At Odds exhibit features a series of nests by artist Sydney Lancaster. The next symbolize identity, security and the concept of home.

Preview

At Odds

Supplied photo
Artwork by Sydney Lancaster, Susan Seright and Claire Uhlick

Runs from Thursday, Feb. 6 to Saturday, Mar. 1

Art Gallery of St. Albert
19 Perron St.

Call the gallery at 780-460-4310 or visit www.artgalleryofstalbert.ca for more information.

There is so much to explore at the Art Gallery of St. Albert's new exhibit that it could easily be thought of as a three-for-one. Visual artists Sydney Lancaster, Susan Seright and Claire Uhlick each contribute a body of work that is striking and meaningful and entirely distinct from the others.

Lancaster, to start, looks at things from a bird's eye view, so to speak. She has created a series of nests that evoke thoughts of strength and nurturing. She describes the body of work as highly symbolic representations of identity, security, the concept of home, and "the many ways human understanding of those things shifts and changes over time." Her contribution consists of drawings, sculptures, video and gel transfer prints of some of her own photographs. Because of the mixed media approach to the focus of her study, the empty nests also come with a lingering sense of loss. We see nests up close and in the physical reality, and far off in an electronic wonderland. Things veer from the real to the imaginary, and the viewer is just tagging along for the ride.

Lancaster said she was inspired by an essay by Gaston Bachelard called *The Poetics of Space*. It discusses the human fascination with birds' nests and how this fascination is related to childhood memories of home.

"A nest in the present-day garden evokes a more archetypal or primal understanding of what the nest means. The bird's home becomes a symbol for a place of security and safety we hold in memory," she said.

"While this may be true for many people, I wanted to work with what I saw as a blind spot, an assumption, in Bachelard's thinking: what if memories of the childhood home were not about feeling safe and secure? What if some of those memories were tied to feelings of isolation or loss or fear? How would that differing experience of the family nest change someone's understanding of that symbol of security, or their sense of who they are in relation to their family nest? As she explored this philosophical quandary, she brought her own life story into the work to make it even richer for herself.

Although these works are much different from the found object creations that she brought to the gallery more than two years ago, there are still some similarities.

"My work has always been concerned with the intersection of place, objects and identity. I am fascinated by the meanings people attach to objects and the way things and places become part of one's identity over time. I've also always been concerned with the relationship humans have with the environment, the way we consume raw materials and what we leave behind."

Tough questions

Seright, on the other hand, offers viewers some tough questions about mental illness, especially regarding the stigmas and misconceptions about them in modern society.

The 60-year-old Edmonton artist (and Nina Haggerty Centre fixture) has only recently renewed her art career after a period in hiatus to raise her children. She works with art books, she explains, because there's no better way to tell her story of bipolar disorder.

"It's just something that I've been interested in for a very long time. Books just absolutely fascinated me. My main theme is mental illness and bipolar disorder and wanting to get out the message of the feelings behind it, kind of break the stigma that's attached to the whole disease."

To do this, her art books come with locks and keys, a birdcage and drawers. All of these are intensely-symbolic representations of being closed in or trapped.

"I'm doing it with the history of my family by using old photos. By incorporating those three elements into my art gets the message across to enlighten people a little bit more."

She added that practicing art has its own healing properties for herself as well.

"Any kind of art is therapeutic," she stated.

Self portraits

Last but certainly not least is Claire Uhlick who offers a series of self portraits. The artist has attempted to elaborate on her personal experiences of loss. She explores the subject in a unique way.

Her oil and acrylic paintings, she explained, depict the "fleeting moment of a figure falling downward, suspended in a free fall and surrounded by an undefined negative space."

It's a dramatic personal narrative that shows the figure – Uhlick herself – with hair flying above her head and her face scrunched in either a static or obviously unhappy emotional state.

"Through grief, I questioned what we really have control over and the seemingly precarious balance we have with life. These paintings show fluctuating expressions from distress to serenity, all within a dream-like space. I am interested in the obscurity of dreams, memories and imagination and how all these things impact the human consciousness," she said.

"This is a fairly personal body of work for me, and sharing these paintings makes me feel a little vulnerable. So the hardest part of this work wasn't preparing the work, but rather sharing it with others."
