
"Artist's Resale Right is very, very important. Canada should be the role model for artists' rights."
- David Blackwood, Artist

The Fire In Labrador

by Robin McGrath

Although the economy of Labrador got a shot in the arm with the development of Muskrat Falls, for every new business that opened, an old one went under. Businesses providing safety equipment or construction services sprang up like mushrooms around Lake Melville but 2014 saw the close of the Labrador Craft Marketing Agency, the Birches Art Gallery, Drumdancer Arts and Crafts, as well as a number of home-licensed art studios such as sculptor John Neville's. Individual artists reported sales drops of as much as 90%.

Attempts to solve the problems faced by the arts community in the province resulted in the planning and execution of "To Light the Fire," the inaugural provincial indigenous arts symposium, held in Happy Valley-Goose Bay from November 19th to the 22nd of this year.

The symposium addressed issues such as commerce, taxation, marketing, social media, funders, art banks, residencies, art education, and gallery practices, augmented by demonstrations of various arts and crafts such as bone carving, drum construction and doll making, as well as performance art including dance and throat singing, a mini film festival and a performance showcase.

The symposium was timed to parallel the 40th Labrador Creative Arts Festival (LCAF), the longest-running children's art festival in the country, and SakKijâjuk, an exhibition of art sponsored by the Nunatsiavut government.

LCAF brought in over 20 home-grown professional artists, many of whom were represented in the art, films and music discussed at the symposium, SakKijâjuk featured over 70 artists and craftpersons, while the symposium had thirty different speakers as well as registered observers from various governments and arts organizations across the country.

Although the art exhibition was limited to Nunatsiavut

beneficiaries, pop-up shops at Hotel North Two included arts and crafts from the Innu communities of Natuashish and Sheshatshiu also.

The SakKijâjuk exhibition included at least one piece by every arts or crafts person who submitted work, so it was a rather uneven display, but 25 of the 125 pieces included in the show will become part of an exhibit to open at the Rooms in September 2016 before going on tour across the country.

Commentators at the symposium explained that craft requires the producer to master the techniques of the practice, while art is the subversion and adaptation of these techniques. The distinction was evident in the juxtaposition of traditional moccasins and sealskin mitts with works by nationally-recognized artists such as Billy Gauthier, Michael Massey and Shirley Moorehouse.

While the traditional seamstresses were edgily dying seal furs red or blue, Moorehouse was constructing whimsical pieces for Domestic Goddesses such as fur and wire high heels, a sealskin apron and crown, and a cocktail tray that included seal fur false eyelashes and other erotica reminiscent of the work of the late Alootook Ipellie.

What's in store for Inuit and First Nations artists in this province is unclear, as the "Next Steps" session of the symposium was closed to the public and the media. Apparently the future of aboriginal art is anybody's guess.



Mi'kmaq educator Julia Blanchard demonstrates fancy shawl dancing