

148th Emancipation Celebration Festival

July 30 - 31, 2010

Grey Roots Museum & Archives and Harrison Park, Owen Sound

Cecilie Posthumus

5th Annual Emancipation Art Show Opening

The opening of the 5th Annual Emancipation Art Show, curated by Anna-Maria Dickinson, featured a beautiful selection of promising works from artists Anna-Maria Dickinson and Tony Miller. Both artists were in attendance at the event and quick to answer any questions that attendees had. Their artwork decorated both the interior of the Grey Roots Theatre and the main foyer, bringing a wonderful ambience to the museum.

Anna-Maria Dickinson's oil-on-canvas works displayed vivid hues contrasted with rich earth tones, achieving a striking balance between colour and depth. "Umbrella Woman" draws the eyes both to the vibrant multi-colour umbrella above a fruit-seller's head and to the pale sack of flour at her feet, these two inanimate objects framing in the foreground the human story at the heart of the piece.



Artists Tony Miller and Anna Maria Dickinson with Dennis Scott (right)

Dickinson's Caribbean works resonate with a fond remembrance of times past, nostalgia and warmth emanating from the canvases. Conversely, "My Father's Hands", possibly the most striking work of hers in the exhibit, presents a much colder view of reality. The viewer's eyes follow the movement of the brightly, but harshly, coloured coins as a pair of worn hands below attempt to grasp them. Along the path of these coins are dull, grey ghosts of the past, evoking a sense of desolation as the coins fall closer and closer to the present. Painted in intricate detail, the outstretched hands show fully the years of toil and hardship through which the patriarch has passed. Accompanying this piece are Dickinson's words: "It was a difficult time; my father did what was necessary to survive. It became a story of starting over so many times. It became my

survival story.” In comparison, Dickinson’s jazz pieces have a more modern, energetic feel to them. Strong colours with a contemporary vibe form a bold, motion-filled backdrop to the expressive central musician figures.

Tony Miller’s artworks feature highly varied media and composition. His enamel and acrylic works in particular are striking for the contrast between these two paints. The tangibility and shine of the enamel is visually in strong opposition to the matte acrylic. “Strange Fruit” (a reference to the song, performed most famously by Billie Holiday) presents an eerie landscape that seems to be slipping away off the canvas. Prominent horizontal lines throughout the work twist and convolute as if the scenery itself is being blown about by the wind. The colours of the piece have been muted, with greyish undertones helping formulate a dream-like quality while understating the intensity of such a strong sense of motion. “Circle of Life” is a haunting mixed media piece that is barren of colour. It captures the image of a human trapped, bound at every point in life by chains, both literal and abstract. The artist uses chain links, telephone wire (?), and bandages (?) to encircle the figure, which also appears to be silenced, lacking a mouth.

Miller’s casting works show, in general, a strong skill for capturing the expressive potential of the human face. The encapsulating media, be they cast plaster or cement, carry varying implications, Miller also creates more traditional works, and the composition of his acrylic-on-canvas “Coming Home” is striking as it gently leads the eye upward. It begins with a singular tree on a sunset horizon before it resolves into the seemingly endless sky towering above it, producing a sense of limitlessness to the piece and to the natural world.

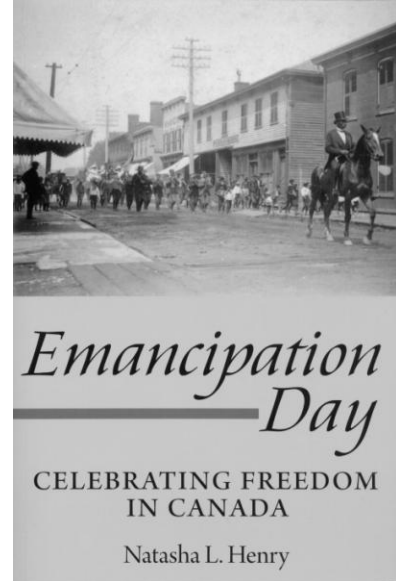
Emancipation Festival Speakers Forum: “Perspectives - Community, Roots & Culture”

Surrounded by art, music, and the audience gladly anticipating the speakers, the Forum began. The Grey Roots town crier opened the evening with strongly-expressed sentiments of freedom and nationalism. Event organisers took the stage to MC the evening, speaking foremost of the aim of the Emancipation Festival to celebrate freedom, choice and love. In Lisa Scott’s words, the Emancipation Celebration was at heart a “love-fest.”



The Hon. Margaret Best (pictured left), Minister of Health Promotion and the only African-Canadian Member of Provincial Parliament currently, came to the podium to speak about the importance of Emancipation Day and Bill 111 -- a bill which was sponsored across all provincial party lines in 2008 to formally declare August 1 as Emancipation Day, to be recognized and celebrated. She acknowledged Owen Sound’s longstanding importance for Black history and culture and how Emancipation Day represents the stories, challenges and struggles of African-Canadian communities. Mayor Ruth Lovell-Stanners was in attendance and took the opportunity, on behalf of the Owen Sound community, to thank the Emancipation Celebration Committee for all of its efforts.

The first keynote speaker of the evening was Natasha Henry, who launched her book *Emancipation Day: Celebrating Freedom in Canada* simultaneous to the event. Henry's self-funded research for her book took over a year to complete and covers the history of Emancipation celebrations coast to coast. Introducing her, Barry Penhall spoke strongly about how Emancipation Day should not be considered simply "old hat," and how the revival of celebrations shows the relevance of this day to modern sentiments. Henry, a local school teacher, outlined several important concepts from her book, including the forms of festivities, the use of the celebration as a lobbying platform for rights, the former solidarity connecting different Black communities in Ontario (such as residents of Owen Sound and Collingwood, who would walk the distance between these locales just to support each other's celebrations), and the longstanding dissent concerning the purpose and appropriate methods of celebrating Emancipation Day.



To remind the audience of the ongoing struggles faced in countries outside our own, Henry quoted Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", encouraging the audience to consider that while things have come a far way from what they were in 1834, there are still "many miles to go" in helping those who still face oppression and prejudice. Henry also provided some of her insight on how to revive dying celebrations. In light of the difficulty some areas have in drawing large enough numbers to support Emancipation Celebrations, she advocated for the introduction of commemoration circuits between small communities that would allow them to host larger events through joint efforts.



The highlight of the evening was Lisa B. Lee (pictured left) and her entertaining, thought-provoking speech "More than the End of the Line." She spoke about the hyper-focus on the Underground Railroad in Ontario Black history and the need to recognize not simply the journey, but also the incredible contributions African-Canadians have made since that migration. As an internationally-renowned genealogist, Lee has travelled all over the world to uncover more about her heritage and that of others, offering advice and aid to those interested in researching their own family history. She critiqued the many negative stereotypes of Black slaves during (and after) the time of the Emancipation Act, and emphasized their technical craft, work ethic, dedication to the

nation, service in the military, and a variety of other important services to Canada.

Lee's performance was both clever and emotional, her empowering recognition of the importance of the Black community to Canadian culture punctuated with humorous anecdotes from her own life and perspective on history. She also asserted the importance of stories: of sharing them, preserving them, and passing them on, even if they are painful to remember. Talking to senior citizens, publishing a blog on one's own family history, or even making a family cookbook were all presented as accessible ways for people to connect with their roots and make knowledge available to younger generations who are interested in their past, as history is only what we share with others.

The evening closed with recognition of Dennis Scott's contributions as Chair of the Emancipation Celebration Committee, and performance artist Tabby Johnson sharing both words and music in a fun and beautiful finale.

148th Emancipation Celebration Picnic

In spite of the drizzly weather on Saturday afternoon, the Emancipation Celebration Picnic at Harrison Park was a lively affair. Filled with games, cultural crafts, and a strong community ambience, there was lots to see and do. The Bobby Blackburn Group and The Sheri Weldon Group serenaded the audience during the Blues, Jazz and R&B showcase, while MC Tabby Johnson shared her stories throughout the event. A special tribute honoured notables including Ovid Jackson, Tommy Earlls, and Norma Blacke Bordeau. The Festival also gave memory to friends and family who passed since the last picnic: Stephanie Miller, London; Andy & Michael Pedersen, Owen Sound; Rebecca Conte (Blackburn), GTA; and Betty MacNeill, Guelph and Bryon Sheffield, Collingwood. The Emancipation community was also sorry to hear of the loss of Priscilla Green of Owen Sound, who was present at this year's picnic and passed away on Saturday evening.

