

Our Prairie in Fibre

dream show for curator

Shannon Boklaschuk
Saskatoon Express

Monika Kinner-Whalen's pride and passion for the prairies can be heard in her voice.

After giving a tour of the latest Saskatchewan Craft Council show on a recent Saturday, she described her curatorial vision.

"I wanted to walk into a room that was full of prairie, and I wanted to be surrounded with just prairie-inspired pieces," she said enthusiastically.

Kinner-Whalen, a Saskatchewan fibre artist who grew up outside of North Battleford, organized the new show at the Affinity Gallery on Broadway Avenue. Entitled *Our Prairie in Fibre*, the exhibition features about 40 pieces created by women from across Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba.

Our Prairie in Fibre is not a touring show; rather, it's the only time the pieces will be together in one room. Visitors will see two-dimensional and three-dimensional works ranging from wall art and home goods to sculpture, wearable items and video installation. Quilting, embroidery, felting, rug hooking, knitting, crocheting and weaving are featured in the show.

The exhibition includes work from emerging artists as well as what Kinner-Whalen describes as "long-standing professionals." There are many fibres used in the pieces, including burlap, cashmere, muslin, felt, wool, cotton, silk, polyester, rayon, acrylic, nylon and more.

It's a dream group show for Kinner-Whalen.

"Everything in this room makes me really happy. I love everything in this room. I just really hope anyone else who walks in can feel that, even if you're not from here," she said.

Each piece in the exhibition tells a story. For example, Rachele LeBlanc's rug, called *As Day Breaks*, portrays her relationship with her new home after moving to Alberta from Quebec. Linda McBain Cuyler's piece, *Com-*

ing to Canada, features acrylic and machine stitching in a found suitcase and depicts how immigrants arrive with their own hopes and dreams.

Nature is a major theme in the exhibition. Kinner-Whalen ensured all four seasons were featured in the show, as well the elements — fire, earth, water and wind.

"I love all four seasons equally," she said.

"They all have their own beauty."

Another thread that ties the pieces together is the women's connection to the prairies. As Kinner-Whalen looked for artwork to include — an activity she called "treasure hunting" — she began to notice the fibre artists were predominantly female. As a result, the show features about 30 women and no men.

"My focus was prairie and fibre, and as much of that as I could get," she said.

"But once the pieces started coming in, and the stories started coming in, it really gelled that this became about women's voices, too — their stories and women's connection to the land and the land's connection to women."

The show opened on Jan. 16, and the Affinity Gallery was "jam-packed" with people for the opening reception, said Kinner-Whalen. The show attracted people from other parts of Canada, and "everyone had big smiles on their faces," she said.

Kinner-Whalen — who is "head over heels for the prairies and stitching" — hopes visitors walk away from the exhibition with an appreciation for her homeland.

"I want them to feel the pride in the prairies — in every part of it, too. Winter is beautiful. The salt flats are beautiful. The muddy road — the mud is beautiful — and even the stormy skies are beautiful."

Our Prairie in Fibre runs until Feb. 21 at the Saskatchewan Craft Council's Affinity Gallery, located at 813 Broadway Ave. A curator's talk will be held on Feb. 5 at 7 p.m. For more information about the exhibition and the craft council, visit www.saskcraftcouncil.org.



Gems of the Salt Flats
by June J. Jacobs (Photo:
Grant Kernan, AK Photos)

Monika Kinner-Whalen organized the new show at the Affinity Gallery on Broadway Avenue (Photo by Shannon Boklaschuk)