

## Web Exclusives

### Centretown News

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As early as 2004, the world became aware of the horrors inflicted by the U.S. Army and CIA groups in Abu Ghraib, Iraq, a series of human rights violations – including physical and sexual abuse, murder, rape and torture – that were photographed and eventually publicized for all to see.

Years later, these atrocities, as well as others of war in the Middle East, inspired local artist Gail Bourgeois to create her piece titled *The heart's long offensive reach*.

Bourgeois' piece now hangs in the Karsh-Masson Gallery in City Hall as a part of a new exhibit called Stories Nearby, a collection of works by Bourgeois and Anna Frlan, a local steel sculptor, on display from Dec. 8 through Jan. 15.

The exhibit focuses on addressing the aftershock of war and the psychological impacts from horrific events that live on through succeeding generations, both directly and indirectly.

The pieces contributing to the collection come in many forms, including drawings, paintings, steel sculptures and plasterwork, allowing for diverse perspectives and interpretation by viewers.

What is noteworthy about the works in the exhibit is that while they greatly rely on depicting human emotions, they don't use the human form at all. Instead, they use structures and objects relatable to or used by humans. This allows the emotions to be felt and received in a way that requires a different perspective.

Frlan's *War Chest*, a steel sculpture piece, conveys "that even though you can travel thousands of miles to establish yourself in a new country, the memories of what you have witnessed remain forever," Frlan said.

The piece is a steamer trunk with a bomb patterned with poppies inside to symbolize lost lives. The trunk is a common household item that many have likely seen in their lifetime. It is an item the viewer can relate to, and as a result, it has the capability of bringing the idea of war back to home.

Inside the seemingly normal object, a steel bomb is encased, symbolizing war and the impact it carries eternally. Once taking a closer look at the bomb,

poppies appear in a pattern, plasma-cut through the steel bomb to represent the remembrance of lost and impacted lives as a result of war.

“The *War Chest* reminded me of many immigrants like my parents who came to Canada in a post-war era,” said Frlan of her Croatian heritage.

Frlan said that she and Bourgeois, comparing their work, realized they “shared common thematic concerns regarding the impact of war on humanity,” which made this exhibit come to fruition.

“It is surprising how relentless wars and systematic destruction to the planet escalated throughout the 20th century causing global trauma,” Bourgeois said.

“These messages are important to convey through art because a gallery can become a space of contemplation, where each viewer can choose to be silent or discuss the works with others,” Frlan said of the messages seen through the works of the two artists.

Meaghan Haughian, gallery co-ordinator of the Public Art Program for the City of Ottawa, said the exhibit is a chance for the public “to view the work of two prominent local artists who use very different materials to express common concerns.”

Frlan uses steel as her main material, welding the metals together to create her art. Bourgeois makes use of many materials, such as carbon and graphite pencils, ink, plaster and Conté crayons. Conté crayons are typically made of powdered graphite or charcoal mixed with a wax or clay substance.

*The heart's long offensive reach* uses Conté and graphite amongst other materials to express these impacts and emotions, incorporating what would seem so simple – basic shapes, red accents and dark shades – to pull the viewer in and tell a much more complex story of grief.

It includes a deep blood coloured rod, supporting two rectangular shapes that are spaced closely together. The rectangular shapes are encompassed by border using light shades, including white and grey tones. Inside, Bourgeois used contrastingly dark red and grey shades, working together to add depth to the piece.

According to Bourgeois, the piece specifically refers to the use of torture in Abu Ghraib, as well as other horrors such as the Holocaust and genocide in Rwanda.

“I would like this piece to represent an encounter with grief, due to how the materials have been thought about and manipulated,” she said.

Stories Nearby aims to deliver messages to humanity about the results of actions in war and the impacts they have, unveiling truths that have been silenced in the past.

“Humanity today is still trying to process through what happened in the past, while also grappling with the impact of ongoing wars today,” Frlan said.

“I do not know if my work concerns humanity, but humanity concerns me,” Bourgeois said. “My work as an artist is about the choices humans make and the consequences of these choices.” \_