

Children of tiny Port Simpson pack big punch in art exhibit

REGENERATION

Auto One, 1725 West Third Ave.
Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
until Nov. 25

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VANCOUVER SUN

REVIEW Few people in the Vancouver area have heard of the Lax Kw'alaams, which translates as "the place of wild roses."

They probably know very little about the tiny Indian village of Port Simpson, once described by a band manager as being "at the forgotten end of the road."

Yet curator Julie Lee has embarked on a project that brings a little of their world to the big bustling city.

It is a world that is as starkly beautiful as it is remote. Fifty km north of Prince Rupert, Port Simpson is accessible only by boat and float plane. It is a pristine world of overturned boats, weathered totem poles, shimmering horizons and shattered dreams, of upended tree stumps that send spindly silhouettes up into the sky.

All of that is captured in an unusual art exhibit called *Regeneration* in the most unlikely place of an auto dealership at Burrard and Third Avenue in the South Granville area.

Lee was involved in a highly successful project last year of displaying photographs by a group of disabled orphans from Kenya to help raise money and awareness of their plight while nourishing the kids with artistic fodder.

If that worked so well, why not use the same model on a remote first nations community, she reasoned, a place that is in our backyard, yet so far away.

She settled on Port Simpson largely because she has a good friend in the forestry business who works with the Lax Kw'alaams band there to develop their own resources. The friend suggested this place: The people here are so warm. They could use a little boost. These children represent the future.

After getting the approval of Chief Garry Reece and the band council, Lee worked with teacher Crystal Clark to set up a media club in the local school. Through this, 11 children were given disposable cameras with black-and-white film to capture their lives in photos.

Lee then took these and handed them over to 20 reputable B.C. painters who used them as grist for the artistic mill. They turned out an exhibition at Auto One of stunning, sophisticated works next to the photographs that inspired them. The depictions are of wood and water, of shadows and sunlight, of ordinary people in an extraordinary place.

The exhibition is putting tiny Port Simpson on the map in more ways than



Above: Self Determination by Michael Abraham on exhibit in Regeneration at Auto One, which is a used car showroom.



Left: The children who inspired Abraham's work Self Determination.

GLENN BAGLO/VANCOUVER SUN

one. Lee is making a National Film Board documentary on the community and the project that will eventually be shown on television.

The children were brought to Vancouver from Port Simpson for the exhibition's opening Thursday.

The excursion was also used as an opportunity for the children to visit museums and galleries, and to pair up with the artists and get some instruction from them.

Lee billed the exhibition as a fair trade art event, meaning that one-third of the profits goes to the professional artists, one-third goes to her as curator and one-third goes to the kids with their portion to be used to set up an arts and cultural program in the school.

She liked the project not only for what it gave the kids but for what it gave the artists as well. It took them outside of their normal purviews and stretched their talents while giving them an opportunity to do some good. It was a true collaboration.

Reece, who came to Vancouver for the exhibition opening, said the project was exciting for the community. It comes at a time when it is on the cusp of change.

Tiny Port Simpson has been wracked by suicide, with first nations youth attempting it and, in one case, succeeding. In a trailer for the NFB film, Reece says that was his own child.

At the same time, he spoke in an interview of the community's progress in terms of paving its streets and sidewalks, building its forestry industry and developing partners with private industry.

Lisa Burke was one of the artists who worked on the project. She produced an oil painting on canvas called *Shape Shifter* that depicts a boy standing with arms crossed in front of a background of ravens and more traditional-looking characters. Watchful and cheeky at the same time, he has a hip-hop look to him.

The black and white images and the ravens represent the traditional past while the central figure represents the modern and the far reach of influences like the Internet. "It's as though he has a split personality in a way," Burke said.

Drawing inspiration as an artist from the children's photographs was a fascinating exercise. "It is amazing how much of their spirit shines through."

She actually got to meet the kids when they came to her studio for an art workshop as part of their Vancouver trip.

She found that in a lot of ways, they are like any school kids who are plugged into the Internet and love to go shopping. But "they are also very connected to each other. They are more of a family with each other."

The challenge of working on such a project, said Burke, was the risk of appropriating first nations imagery for her art work. She worried about infringing on their spirituality.

"The question was how much can I take and how do I put it through my filter while paying homage to it?"

Judging by *Shape Shifter*, she seems to have struck the right balance.

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