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Tanks and pink knitted land mines

War-themed art and personal tales bring to life forgotten part of Durham Region's past

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Gil McElroy stands in front of 26 teenagers, chomping noisily on a banana. Between mouthfuls he tells them about an 11-year-old girl who has nothing to eat after her town in northern France is bombed during the war 63 years ago.

For two weeks she survives on nothing but banana-flavoured pudding.

"That young girl," McElroy tells the Grade 10 history class, "was my mother."

"Her strongest memory about the war was bananas. It took a lot of years before she could bring herself to eat one."

McElroy, interim curator of Station Gallery in Whitby, tells this story to illustrate an important point: "War is personal."

It's an oft-repeated message during the students' visit to the gallery, where an exhibit of war-themed art brings history to life and highlights a sometimes forgotten part of Durham Region's past.

During World War II, what is now Ajax was home to the Pickering Works, the largest munitions plant in the British Empire. Forty million bombs were produced over four years — built by 9,000 people from across Canada who created an instant community in the cornfields.

A few kilometres east, in 1941, a secret military installation known as Camp X was set up on the Lake Ontario waterfront. Created by Sir William Stephenson, it trained agents and saboteurs to work behind enemy lines in Europe.

The spy school is long gone and all that's left of the factory is the underground heating plant, which, on a winter day, still sends up clouds of steam into the industrial park occupying the site, says McElroy.

But those two pieces of history are

connected to the present through the work of five Canadian artists in Station Gallery's show, "Prohibited Areas & Non-Sites: Invoking Camp X and Pickering Works."

Their creations include a full-scale sculpture of a tank accompanied by an IKEA-inspired catalogue and do-it-yourself instructions; ceramic renditions of IEDs (improvised explosive devices) and knitted versions of landmines.

A "military brat" himself, McElroy curated the exhibition to teach people about the area's origins. But equally important is the lesson about how war affects everyone.

"For all these artists, it's personal," he tells the class from Henry St. High School. "What really bugs Sarah Beck (who built the tank) is that war is big business and people are making a lot of money from it. She satirizes that whole thing by making the purchase of military stuff like buying toothpaste."

For the assembly line workers at the munitions plant, making bombs was a matter of survival.

"You could make 50 cents an hour, which was a very good way of making a living back then."

The land mines, knitted by artist Barbara Hunt in soft pink — "the colour of innocence" — look harmless, McElroy tells the class. But their real-life counterparts "blow up little kids, and after the war's over, places like Iraq and Afghanistan are just littered with them."

McElroy encourages the students to stand on a 401 overpass the next time the body of a Canadian soldier travels the "Highway of Heroes."

"You really realize in your gut that it's personal, that it affects you in a really direct way."

The exhibition runs until Dec. 3. Station Gallery, at 1450 Henry St. in Whitby, is open seven days a week. Admission is free.



DAVID COOPER/TORONTO STAR

Students from Henry St. High School in Whitby look at replica of a tank by artist Sarah Beck at the Station Gallery.

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