

With spring in the air, most people will be rejoicing. No more car trouble or icy streets. However, the SAW Gallery decided to showcase winter and its extremes with its The Winter Life exhibit from Feb. 3 to March 19.

Self-confessed winter hater Stefan St. Laurent was part of the curatorial think tank that dreamed up the concept in hope of hosting an unconventional yet realistic view of the great white season.

"We wanted to do something really quite different on the theme of winter so we decided to focus more on performance-based artwork," said St. Laurent.

The exhibit was held in collaboration with Winterlude, which was a first-time liaison between SAW and the National Capital Commission. Although the gallery tries to expose its audience to performance-based artwork, its Winter Life effort also promised to help expand the age group of their audience and create a community environment.

"A project like this opens up contemporary art to a lot of people including youth and children," said St. Laurent. "It is quite a rare opportunity for families to engage with contemporary art without having to censor what they are showing for their kids."

Eryn Foster's Ice Utopia sculptures made with Tupperware containers were erected in the SAW courtyard with the help of high school students, while Liss Platt's Puck Painting performance was held on the Canal with the help of guest shooters from a women's hockey league.

"A couple of the pieces are going to be a real community effort," said Erin Kelly, communication and outreach supervisor at SAW. "It's really a lot of people getting involved in the installation, preparation and execution of all the works."

But participation by the audience was not the only goal the gallery hoped to achieve. Another important aspect, according to

St. Laurent is having the public understand the context of performance artwork because of the negative wrap that artists receive. He said the press often sensationalized one aspect of an artist's performance work, which led to the public having a negative connotation of it.

"This is a perfect opportunity to demystify what performance art is and how artists work with performance and their bodies and all their stuff," said St. Laurent.

Drawing the example of artist Joelle Ciona, St. Laurent explained that her work Condensation was not just about pushing herself across Lake Louise in an icebox, but her ability to challenge the limits to which she could push herself. It was a metaphor, which also could be said to allude the condition of women in society.

"Working with physical, mental, and emotional endurance I test the systems and processes of my own body," said Ciona. "The aim is to reveal possibilities and outcomes."

The world premier of Remix 2004 was another attraction at the exhibit. In production for a couple of years, it consists of artists remixing a television program using only the audio and video the clip provides. In 2004 the last game of the Stanley Cup was chosen which is ironic yet appropriate because of the current NHL lockout.

"SAW gallery seems to have good luck with timing," said St. Laurent. "The Remix curators were searching for a venue for the screening and it was a perfect fit for the Winter Life opening reception."

Along with the positive response from artists the gallery also received heavy interest from the local press. St. Laurent said it felt like they

were successful before the show debuted because of the excitement it generated. Ciona thought the ability for the public to bring their own memories and experiences to the exhibit was what would make them responsive to the artwork.

"The take on winter itself can have quite a nationalistic tone as it has a lot of appeal to Canadian culture," said Kelly.

Although it was the element of fun that attracted Foster to display her sculptures, it was the bond between hockey and winter and the chance to skate on the Canal that sold the exhibition for Platt. An avid hockey player, her Puck Paintings were unique because she felt since hockey was nostalgic for most Canadians, it gave them an immediate connection to the work.

"This would be interesting to people who like art or hockey so that covers a nice mix of people," said Platt. "It provides people an opportunity to think about art and sport in a different way."

Leaving the audience with various perspectives on winter culture and how people deal with winter was what St. Laurent wanted to finally achieve with the exhibit. Though it was not a celebration of the season, he felt it was presenting the way it was used as a metaphor and its role in influencing fashion, art and architecture that was important. "It's about seeing the realities and fantasies about winter," said St. Laurent. "To think more about performance art than (the audience) are accustomed to, and to think about other shows and contemporary art."

Fantasizing winter through performance art

> by beverley ann d'cruz

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