

Winnipeg art world makes its COVID comeback

By: Ben Waldman

Posted: 2:00 AM CDT Friday, Jun. 17, 2022



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Susan Lamberd speaks after winning the 2022 Making a Difference Award for her work with Arts AccessAbility Network Manitoba.

Chicken was served and honours doled out Thursday at the Fort Garry Hotel, where a crowd of luminaries gathered for the annual Winnipeg Arts Council Awards, presented during the Mayor's Luncheon for the Arts.

Susan Lamberd was excited to see so many artists and people she admired all in the same room.

"You see Mayor Bowman, and you see the police chief, and all of these dignitaries,"

says Lamberd, nominated for a Making a Difference Award for her work with Arts AccessAbility Network Manitoba. "It felt a little bit intimidating."

Lamberd likely wasn't the only one feeling excited and a wee bit out of practice when it comes to attending galas: Thursday's event was the first iteration since 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic hit and the arts community the luncheon celebrates was thrown into disarray.

It's been said the arts industry — concerts, films, performances, galleries and more — was among the first to shut down and would be among the last to return to pre-pandemic levels. Over two years after the curtains were drawn, the luncheon — hosted by Jim Agapito, a local artist and host of CBC's Recovering Filipino podcast, with a performance by the Gabi Ocejo Trio, and remarks from poet laureate Duncan Mercredi — served as a brief and for many a long-awaited celebration for the industry's perseverance.

Winners from the 2021 awards, which never had an in-person portion, were honoured a year later. Author Tasha Spillett, multi-disciplinary artist Divya Mehra, producer and organizer Lisa Meeches, and longtime public art advocate Heather Cram received their awards. Dr. Douglas MacEwan, who walked one kilometre every day for 96 days to celebrate his 96th birthday and raise funds for the city's arts community, was given a well-earned recognition as the official arts champion.

The 2022 winners came from a list of nominees each deserving of a plaque, but ultimately, one winner had to be selected in each category. Digital artist Taylor McArthur, nominated by the National Indigenous Media Coalition, was named winner of the On the Rise award. Filmmaker Rhayne Vermette, nominated by Mentoring Artists for Women's Art, won the Making a Mark award. Each award is accompanied by a \$5,000 cash prize.

When it came time for Lamberd's category, the former computer analyst turned artist reflected on how wonderful it was to have the work of the AANM recognized on such a stage. The organization helps break down barriers for artists living with disabilities, and over the past decade has helped those artists access grants, mentorship,



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Mayor Brian Bowman (from left) Taylor McArthur, Rhayne Vermette, Susan Lamberd, Ken Fetherstonhaugh, and Jim Agapito pose for a photo after the Mayor's Luncheon for the Arts at the Fort Garry Hotel Thursday.

festivals, programs and more.

The Making a Difference award's slate of nominees was stacked, between Lamberd, Norine Harty, Angela Heck and Natasha Torres-Garner. So Lamberd was pleased just to have been nominated and to be in the same room as Mayor Brian Bowman, whom she says she admires.

When she won, Lamberd was shocked. But she was ready. "I did have a speech prepared," she says.

When she got to the podium, Lamberd had to stand on her tiptoes to be seen or heard. She thanked her organization's co-founders, Marie Bouchard and Susan Gibson, plus the members of the board of directors. "Also thank you to my family for

donating our dining room to be used as an office for at least five years," she told the crowd.

She discussed the barriers that exist for artists with disabilities, and how easily many of them can be removed, making for a more equitable experience in the arts, opening the door for more artists of all backgrounds to find their niche.

"In the end, it's unique, distinct perspectives that offer a new voice in the arts world," she said. "Our voice says we're proud of where we came from, who we are, and ultimately what our disability has manifested for us."

Lamberd said it was still surprising to her that she won, but she said she'll proudly display her plaque in her home studio.

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