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A feast for the eyes, food for the soul

Scott MacLeod's famine exhibit 'The Starving Can't Eat Stone'

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Scott MacLeod's exhibit 'The Starving Can't Eat Stone,' currently at Bishop's University Art Gallery, is named for the coffin ships which carried timber to Europe.

Starving Irish people served as human ballast (instead of stones) on the return trips to Canada. In considering the quarantining of the Irish immigrants at Grosse-Ile, 10,000 of whom died of cholera and typhus, MacLeod marries words with art to parallel past and present injustices.

Celtic ancestry and an interest in history sparked his enquiry.

"In the mid-1700s, my family came to Canada as a result of the Scottish Clearance. My personal experience, my enquiry, was into history. My grandfather was a historian," MacLeod said.

The difficulties of being a young artist gave MacLeod an empathy for people in need.

"Choosing a vocation as an artist, you go from feast to famine. There were times I frequented a food bank, being an artist."

MacLeod was also inspired by some things said by former Irish President Mary Robinson's visit to Grosse-Ile.

"She saw a cross and mass graves and said, 'Tragedy must be seen as human and not historic ... to think of it in national terms alone can obscure that fact, and as I stood looking at the Irish graves, I was also listening to the story of the French-Canadian families who braved fever and shared their food, who took the Irish into their homes and into their heritage,'" MacLeod quoted.

The words of the victims themselves are important to MacLeod, who found Mariana O'Gallagher's 'I Witness Grosse Ile 1847' a good source of material.

"You want to be universal," said MacLeod, "but at the same time, we have to use specific examples to legitimize the query. This is why Mariana O'Gallagher's book is so important. It includes testimony from the witnesses themselves through their eyes."

As the paintings move from Grosse-Ile to references to the Irish famine and famines of today, they move back



PERRY BEATON/SPECIAL

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to parallels with North America's Plains Indians.

"I've been looking at the Plains Indians and studying what happened to them with the buffalo. I see a parallel with the buffalo being a staple. The government targeted the buffalo to decimate them and put the Indians into reserves. That's what this enquiry is about — to look back in history and see mistakes and persecutions made on these people and put it into a contemporary context."

The paintings use a variety of media. "I use beeswax, mylar, paper, canvas, wood and found objects," McLeod said.

"Another element is to have text. It is hard to have an aesthetic and be literal. There is a beautiful quality, choice of colours and textures. If you get people in, they can start reading its context."

From the mournful faces of the couple in 'Unknown Arrivals' (mixed media on canvas) to the teepee-shaped 'What a Buffalo Provides,' one cannot be unmoved by the paintings of Scott MacLeod.

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'The Starving Can't Eat Stone' runs through Nov. 21 at the Bishop's University Art Gallery.

