

Creativity Born of Chaos

What's Up Yukon

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by **Glenda Koh**

They say moving house is one of life's most stressful experiences.

For Lara Melnik, throw in the extra pressure of an exhibition deadline and the generally frenetic pace of summer in the Yukon, and you end up with a colourful celebration of chaos.

Pandemonium...the art of change is showing at the Chocolate Claim for the month of August. It is a delightful sample menu of Melnik's quirky and whimsical polymer clay works.

Her eclectic offering ranges from perky mushrooms to abstract flatwork mosaics. The show also contains a number of small landscape pieces which, despite their size (generally two to three inches), perfectly evoke the beauty of the Yukon, as well as several small flower sculptures.

Though Melnik's work is generally small, due to the mere fact that the polymer clay is baked in a conventional oven, there are a few larger pieces in the show.

"ode to joy" is a colour study consisting of a grid of almost monochromatic tiles, each uniquely embossed and textured.



cosmic confections



allsorts of fun



Lara Melnik with one of her favourite pieces in the Pandemonium exhibit, called "daisy unplugged"

PHOTO: Ken Bolton

Another large piece is the diptych "summer now" and "summer then". The two panels consist of a cascade of flowers that cover the spectrum; in the first are the warm colours of fall and in the second, the cool hues of spring.

Long loved by many for her colourful jewellery, Melnik started making larger works several years ago.

"I'm torn between art pieces and jewellery. But I never get bored with either," she explains. "I love making beads, but it's very small. The art pieces can be more showy and elaborate."

One of the many endearing traits of Melnik's work is their names. Each piece, whether earrings or sculpture, is uniquely and appropriately named. Not just mere descriptions, the names are like snippets of poetry that give the work added complexity.

"Frodo's trail snacks," for example, is a sprightly row of green mushrooms. "night narcissus" is a flatwork sculpture of night flowers, only in greyscale.

For Melnik, naming her work is an important part of the creative process.

"Some of them can take a few weeks. Sometimes I'm making the piece and I know exactly what

I'm going to call it. Sometimes I need to sit with the piece for a few hours, just by myself, with books and reference books and dictionaries around me."

A former biology major, Melnik likes to riff on Latin taxonomy. She also plays with different languages to create words.

At times, the name comes before the piece.

"Sometimes names just come to me, but I don't have a piece for it. I just keep it in reserve."

Melnik was recently delighted by an incident at the Fireweed Community Market. A couple of young Belgians, perhaps in their late teens, had been led to her shop by their friend, a woman from Minnesota, unknown to the artist. The woman told them that they should buy some local art from Melnik.

After looking carefully through her selection, one of them chose a pair of earrings called "two true" for his twin sister, whom he missed, for their birthday.

He was amazed by the individual names on her jewellery and told Melnik that it was the name that led to his choice.

"It brought tears to my eyes," she says.

Being called a local artist is fitting for Melnik. It's a term that captures the holy trinity of her artistic practice: everyday life, the natural world that captures her, and the community that supports her.

"People want to know what inspires me. It's all the moments in life. It's seeing a weird yellow bug underneath my porch, or seeing the colour of your shirt and then going home and trying to make it. It's not an exact depiction of what I saw, it's an interpretation."

Melnik seems to punctuate her life with her artwork in a way that other people keep journals. It's almost a stream-of-consciousness approach to art.

Because the Yukon is where she lives and creates, Melnik also feels that it's the home of her art too. Although she will sell pieces online and ship outside the Yukon, she doesn't market her work outside.

"I live in the Yukon. I want people to come to the Yukon and buy something that was made in the Yukon. I don't need my artwork in a gallery in Nova Scotia or in Calgary because I don't live there. This is my home."

Melnik obviously takes great pleasure in her surroundings and her work is bound to bring joy to those who view it.

Glenda Koh enjoys looking at art and making up acronyms while living in Whitehorse.