

Thank you everyone for coming out today and for being here to help celebrate this phase of my project. Before anything else I would like to take time to recognize the official land acknowledgment for the City of Hamilton:

The City of Hamilton is situated upon the traditional territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee and Mississaugas. This land is covered by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, which was an agreement between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabek to share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. We further acknowledge that this land is covered by the Between the Lakes Purchase, 1792, between the Crown and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

Today, the City of Hamilton is home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island (North America) and we recognize that we must do more to learn about the rich history of this land so that we can better understand our roles as residents, neighbours, partners and caretakers.

I do owe special thanks to all the people who helped support me over the past few years – my family for all their patience and ongoing encouragement, countless friends and colleagues for providing some of the reference photos I needed, my friend Jan who ordered all my frames and glass, the amazing staff here at the Museum for helping to make this exhibition happen and the City of Hamilton – City Enrichment Fund for the 2022 Creation and Presentation Award that helped fund part of my work.

I also need to recognize the amazing biodiversity that surrounds us and to thank these and all species for choosing to reside among us – without them I would not have had the subject matter needed to complete these paintings.

To help everyone better understand how this project came together I thought I should provide some background about me and the work you see here.

This collection started in March 2019 when I was awarded the Hamilton Arts Council – Cotton Factory Artist in Residency. That 3-month residency allowed me the space and inspiration necessary to create the first six paintings in what I was originally calling “My Backyard Neighbours”. I had set out to create a series of Chinese Brush paintings on semi absorbent Mulberry rice paper – each one depicting one of these “neighbours”. Ultimately, I wanted to prepare a full exhibition of works to share both the beauty and diversity of nature that (when we look) we all have – right in our own backyards.

That residency was just the beginning though as I soon realized having a dedicated space to paint helped inspire me to produce the works necessary for such an exhibition. With my name on the wait list I hoped for my own space at the Cotton Factory and by September 2019 I was opening a studio in the Mill Arts Building. Unfortunately, as we all know, covid happened, limiting any possible income opportunities for me and after a major injury, I was forced to work from home for much of that first year. Although I had to give up the studio at

the end of my three-year lease I was still able to create many of the pieces you see here today while in that space. The real bonus of having that studio however was maintaining my relationship with the community of great artists and good friends I had developed at the Cotton Factory.

This exhibition serves two purposes. While the first and most important was my desire to increase awareness about Hamilton's amazing biodiversity I also wanted to highlight the unique process I used to create the work. I discovered Chinese Brush Painting in 2001 while working towards my Visual Arts Certificates at Mohawk College. I earned those three certificates long ago but still continue to take classes at Mohawk in this medium. My interest in Chinese culture and this art form has provided many opportunities for me including 3 trips to China over the last 10 years to learn about the country and its people, to exhibit my work there – and of course buy my art supplies. What I am wearing today is just one more example of the influence this culture has had on me.

Many people have asked me if this is like painting in watercolours. Chinese paint is water soluble however that is where the similarities end. The ground used in Chinese Brush Painting can vary from silk to a variety of different rice papers – from absorbent through to non-absorbent. Each having its own unique properties and challenges. Unlike watercolours Chinese painting is permanent – that means when you apply a colour to the rice paper you have to be sure that is what you want – there is no lifting off the colour once it has stained the paper. Rice paper is also very fragile as this piece of Mulberry Rice paper shows – you can't use pencil to draw on it and overworking or over wetting it can cause it to tear. Once I complete a painting it must then be mounted to another piece of rice paper to provide the stability needed before it can be framed. The brushes I use are also very different from what are generally used in watercolour. Chinese brushes are all made from a variety of natural animal hair – each type of hair specific to a particular purpose. The similarities to traditional Chinese Brush painting end with the materials I use. Like other artists I take all my experiences and interests together to create my own style of art.

My background as a mechanical and tool and die draftsman greatly influences how I work now. This need for precision and detail unfortunately has carried over into my paintings. While I really enjoy the detail and control necessary for botanical illustration I have embraced Chinese Painting on semi absorbent rice paper as a way of challenging myself to let go a little and loosen up my work. Abstract painting still terrifies me so I know I still have a long way to go.

I have always loved nature and especially native gardening so when I received a copy of the publication, "What's Alive in Hamilton" I realized that there was much to learn about the many species found in this area, many of which are considered at risk, endangered or threatened. This document however doesn't provide many images to show what these species looked like so I set out to learn as much as I could and to illustrate as many of these species as possible for my collection.

When the United Nations declared 2020 to 2030 the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration it gave me even more incentive to develop a comprehensive collection of work that I could share with the community and help raise awareness about Hamilton's rich biodiversity and is my way of participating in this initiative.

I was also fortunate to be able to borrow a copy of the most recent Hamilton Natural Areas Inventory to help with my research. This document was developed in partnership between the Hamilton Conservation Authority and the City of Hamilton along with the support of several local agencies, individuals and staff. The report contains specific annotated species checklists for all the natural areas in Hamilton. These lists including vascular plants (that's everything from trees to grasses), birds, butterflies, odonates (dragonflies and damselflies), amphibians and reptiles, fish, and mammals. The inventory however does not include any non-vascular plants like mushrooms and mosses or insects or spiders among others. Using this document, I recreated each checklist including only key information and then highlighted those I have completed so far to help further illustrate Hamilton's vast biodiversity. These checklists are located on the table by the door.

This 295-page document, prepared in 2014, lists 1,470 species of vascular plants of which 962 are native and 508 are introduced or invasive. Of the species listed 350 are rare, 117 are uncommon and 76 are identified as provincially rare. The Butterflies list indicates 95 species were found, 77 were classified as resident species including 11 rare, 19 uncommon and 6 provincially significant species. The Odonate list identifies 86 permanent species – 35 Damselflies and 51 Dragonflies with another 11 temporary residents. The fish checklist contains 100 distinct species and of the 71 existing native fishes 30 species are considered highly significant or rare, 17 are uncommon and 5 are considered nationally significant. The herpetofauna list indicates 32 native species – 5 are abundant, 6 are common, 3 are uncommon and 16 are rare. It also identifies that 2 species have been extirpated from the Hamilton area. The list of breeding birds in Hamilton indicates a total of 164 species – 50 are rare, 49 are uncommon, 33 are common and 23 are abundant. Finally, there are 44 mammals existing in Hamilton, 3 of those are identified on the SARAS or nationally significant list, 4 are listed as ESA provincially significant, 3 are on the NHIC provincially significant list, 8 are considered highly significant and 3 are moderately significant in Hamilton. There are an additional 12 species that were listed as extirpated.

I realize this may seem like just a long list of numbers but when these are added up they indicate that there are 2,003 unique species identified as living in the Natural Areas of Hamilton – and remember the document does not include all possible species lists. While I have completed 80 paintings so far the 40 pieces you see here in this room only represent approximately 2% of the total species that were inventoried on natural areas in Hamilton. It is my hope that this exhibition and the information I have provided will help change how some people appreciate and, will then ultimately protect Hamilton's natural areas.

After reading the books *Gathering Moss* and *Braiding Sweetgrass* I have developed an even greater respect for the biodiversity that surrounds us. Not just for the vast numbers but for

their relationship to each other and to us. Some of my paintings illustrate these partnerships – how one species depends on another for its existence. What I haven't been able to demonstrate however is how everything else is connected – how all species depend on every other for their very existence or, more importantly, what happens when even just one is lost.

This brings us back to the UN's declaration for ecosystem restoration. Their website states: "There has never been a more urgent need to revive damaged ecosystems than now. Ecosystems support all life on earth. The healthier our ecosystems are, the healthier the planet – and its people. The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration aims to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems on every continent and in every ocean. It can help to end poverty, combat climate change and prevent mass extinction. It will only succeed if everyone plays a part."

Many people don't believe that individually they can make a difference but I firmly believe in the teachings of the Indigenous leaders. They tell us we all need to respect the land, air and water and warn that whatever happens to the animals will happen to us. This project may not play a significant role in stopping the collapse of our local biodiversity but is my way of trying to make a difference – to encourage people to better understand what is at risk.

By combining my love of nature and science, with my passion for art, I am trying to raise awareness of Hamilton's wonderful biodiversity and the urgent need to protect it. I hope this work helps to encourage others to find their own way to help make a difference.