

# THE ARTS

## Former SOVA student evokes Prairie childhood in award-winning artwork

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News Reporter

A pickup truck drives down a telephone-pole-lined dirt road, brown fields stretching out endlessly on either side.

An electric guitar sits propped up on a droopy-backed couch, its boiled-egg-yolk-yellow upholstery accented with clashing pink-and-blue flowers.

A black inner tube sits on the ground, a faded pink towel draped over its edge.

For those who grew up in small-town Canada, particularly in the Prairies, the images are meant to evoke a sense of nostalgia — summers at the lake, hanging out at friends' houses, dreams of being a rock star, coming of age in a place that feels cozy but suffocating all at once.

The work of former Yukon School of Visual Arts student Kayza DeGraff-Ford, the piece is titled *Landscapes: Brown Kids From The Prairies*. It will be among the 13 exhibited at a Toronto gallery next month as part of the showcase for this year's winners of the BMO 1st Art! Competition, an annual event where judges select the best work from graduating studio art classes across the country.

DeGraff-Ford, who did a one-year program at SOVA from September 2016 to April 2017, was the 2017 regional winner for the Yukon, which, on top of being part of the Toronto showing, comes with a \$7,500 prize.

"It feels like a pretty big deal to me.... It feels like a big deal for me to meet all these other artists from across Canada, and to get on a plane for it — that's a pretty big deal," DeGraff-Ford, 24, said in a phone interview from Halifax, where they're currently studying painting at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

DeGraff-Ford said the piece, which consists of two small sculptures (the couch and the inner tube) and a framed, three-part painting, was partly inspired by how Dawson City reminded them of their hometown of Lacombe, Alta., about



One of Kayza DeGraff-Ford's creations, titled *Landscapes: Brown Kids From The Prairies*, will be among the 13 exhibited at a Toronto gallery next month as part of the showcase for this year's winners of the BMO 1st Art! Competition. DeGraff-Ford is a former Yukon School of Visual Arts student.

125 kilometres south of Edmonton.

"A lot of the images (in the painting) were actually from Dawson City because it's funny, it's a northern Yukon town but it has a lot of Prairie-looking elements, like old run-down barn houses and stuff and old trucks," DeGraff-Ford said.

"(Dawson) made me a little homesick, yeah. I think at that point, I hadn't been back to Lacombe in probably six years or so."

Living and studying in Dawson also reminded DeGraff-Ford of another part of their childhood in Lacombe, a memory brought to the forefront in the piece's title — being half Black and half German, DeGraff-Ford and their sister were the only "brown" kids in town.

"I felt just very curious about my background because I wasn't necessarily seeing a lot of myself around (growing) up in such a small area.... I didn't have a lot of, I guess, other people who looked like me," DeGraff-Ford said.

"I guess there's a sort

of modernness about it....

It was sort of a mix of this modernness of this brown kid whose dad was from Philadelphia growing up in the middle of the Prairies."

DeGraff-Ford added that they were grateful for their time at SOVA, which they heard about by chance.

"My mom's friend used to live (in Dawson) and she saw a painting I did that was of a bunch of old buildings," DeGraff-Ford said. "She said it looked a lot like Dawson and told me about the school that was there, so that was the first time I'd even heard of its existence. And I'm really happy I heard about it because it's a really cool town."

*Landscapes: Brown Kids From The Prairies* will be exhibited along with 12 other 1st Art! winners at the University of Toronto's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery from Nov. 16 to Dec. 16.

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Charity Justrabo photo  
Kayza de Graff-Ford at the Yukon Wildlife Preserve in Whitehorse.



Submitted photo