

Mural's message of hope, inspiration called heart-gripping

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What was once a brick wall is now adorned with a five-storey depiction of an indigenous woman mending a human heart.

The mural, honoured on Thursday as the 2016 Winnipeg Mural of the Year, was spray-painted on the side of the Vineyard Church north of the Main Street underpass at Sutherland Avenue.



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The mural on Vineyard Church depicts an indigenous woman mending a human heart with a needle and thread.

In ways overt and subtle, it explores truth and reconciliation and pays respect to missing and murdered indigenous women and girls in the core of a neighbourhood where many people have lost their loved ones.

When drivers emerge from the underpass and look forward, they see the woman on the wall.

"That's exactly the point," said Vineyard pastor John Rademaker during a celebratory luncheon Thursday.

"You can't ignore that," Rademaker said. "This project has turned an ugly wall into a significant statement in this locale for the entire city to see and enjoy," he said.

The mural, titled *Mending*, was selected by a panel of judges assembled by Bob Buchanan, the creator of themuralsofwinnipeg.com.

For 15 years, the website has picked a winning mural created during the preceding calendar year, and Buchanan said this year's winner had resounding support among the panel.

"It's iconic," Buchanan said. "Look at this wall. It's got a positive message of hope. The heart is glowing, even though it's ripped."

Steve Wilson, the director of the Graffiti Gallery, said the mural cost roughly \$20,000, with about half coming from the Manitoba Arts Council and other project grants and fundraising.

Painted in September 2016 by Bruno Smoky and Shalak Attack, a married couple who work professionally under the name "Clandestinos," the mural isn't limited to the struggles of indigenous women in Canada.

It depicts issues that are similar wherever indigenous land was colonized and the mural's figure is based on indigenous women from Peru.

The artists worked with a panel of elders who helped ensure the mural included respectful and detailed symbols from indigenous cultures around the world, from pine cones to feathers to vamps, the two circular white objects on the woman's chestpiece that represent missing and murdered women and girls.

"This corner of the city is widely known as one of the worst for this," Shalak writes on Buchanan's website. "We felt it was important to symbolize this and recognize its reality and that we have to start talking about it and be aware, even though some people might be uncomfortable about it."

Bernadette Smith, the newly elected NDP MLA for Point Douglas, attended the luncheon. Smith's sister, Claudette Osborne, went missing in 2008, so the mural struck an emotional chord.

"It's a symbol of the strength of our women," Smith said. "It's also bringing a light to an end of the city where often it's dark."

The mural is only a short distance from the Vineyard Memorial Garden, a site for reflection on and remembrance of 22 missing or slain women in the neighbourhood. In 2011, April Hornbrook was found dead behind the now-demolished Yellow Warehouse, metres away from where the mural now stands.

"This location has a history of tragedy and compassionate response to events that have blighted our history in the past," Rademaker said.

Kirby Boucher, 46, has attended services at Vineyard for 22 years and can't help but smile at the beautiful mural he walks by every week.

When he looks at the mural, Boucher sees hope for his community and for indigenous people around the world.

"I see the heart and the colours of the nations helping each other to mend the broken hearts," he said. "It's telling everyone in the city that there can be peace and happiness here."

"This mural brings peace to everybody," Boucher said optimistically.

At the very least, he knows it won't be ignored.

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