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Students connect to Israel through art

RITA POLIAKOV, Staff Reporter, Thursday, March 11, 2010

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The menorah in Liat Shalom's artwork isn't just a religious symbol. It's a link to her heritage.

Liat Shalom submitted this digitally manipulated photograph of herself to Artzy, a Hillel-sponsored arts and music night. Ryerson University student Tal-Or Freedman took the original photo.

"That specific menorah has been in my family for four or five generations. It was given to my mom by my great-grandfather," she said, adding that he immigrated from Poland to New Brunswick, where he helped start a Jewish community.

"He built a shul with his own two hands," she said.

Shalom, a first-year new-media-arts student at Ryerson University, uses her art, which includes sketches and digitally manipulated photos, to express the connection with Judaism that her grandfather worked so hard to forge.

This is why it's appropriate that she submitted her work to Artzy, a Hillel-sponsored arts and music night that takes place on March 18 at Andrew Richard Design Studio in Toronto.

In its third year, Artzy aims to celebrate Israel and Judaism through music, photography and visual art. The event, which is supported by the Birthright alumni committee, features more than 50 works of art from students and community members in Ontario, as well as a performance by Israeli singer David Broza.

While attending last year's event, Shalom, who was born in Israel and moved to Canada three years ago, felt homesick.

"It had a lot of very strong symbolism, it evoked a lot of very strong emotions in me," Shalom said. "It's a good way to see Israel through various people's eyes."

Rotem Stark, Hillel's director of arts and culture in Toronto, agrees.

Stark has been organizing this year's event with Hillel since September.

"It's such a special night. This is really a night for everyone in the community to come together, regardless of age and background," she said, adding that Artzy is a change from most pro-Israeli events.

"We do so much in the community in Hillel. We have so many initiatives that have to do with politics. Through art, I feel people can really connect in different ways," she said. "Art can be so many things to so many people. It's such a beautiful way to bring people together."

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So far, about 25 artists have submitted work, which includes everything from mezuzot and sculptures to animations, musical performances and paintings.

The fact that Artzy falls right after Israeli Apartheid Week isn't a coincidence, Stark said.

"It's a good time to have it because IAW is such a hit on the Jewish community and our students. We wanted to have a great event, an uplifting event just to show the beautiful side of Israel," she said.

For Maxine Seider, a fourth-year arts and science student at the University of Guelph, the event is a good way to connect with the Jewish community.

"I think it's a way that people can connect in a non-political environment," she said, adding that she's also submitted work to Artzy.

"It's a great way to get people hooked on Israel... we need that. A lot of people see Israel as this political place where there's a lot of conflict. I think it's important to show the fun side."

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