

Ex-astronaut Roberta Bondar showcases art at Lunenburg photo exhibit

LOIS ANN DORT

Published August 20, 2017 - 3:16pm

Last Updated August 20, 2017 - 3:19pm



Roberta Bondar is shown taking photos on the Masa in Kenya in this undated photo. (Contributed)

LUNENBURG — Role model, icon, passionate earthling, Canada's astronaut queen; Dr. Roberta Bondar can be described with a galaxy of appellations. But since she captured the imagination and heart of the nation as Canada's first female astronaut on Discovery mission STS-42 in 1992, she has been roundly recognized as a leading light in matters of science and later, with her photography-based projects, art.

This year, Bondar has parlayed her passion for photography into a travelling exhibit entitled *Light in the Land—the Nature of Canada* which is currently showing at the Lunenburg School of the Arts — on public exhibit until Sept. 16 — on Nova Scotia's South Shore. She sat down with *The Chronicle Herald* at the opening of her exhibit to talk about science, art and the challenges she continues to set for herself.

Light in the Land is a photographic representation of every Canadian province and territory; a unique introduction to Canadians both new and old to the biological and geological diversity of this vast country. When asked why this project was important to her, Bondar said, "because this is part of my earth observation, exploration, part of being an astronaut."

Bondar's career in science is an intricate part of her career in art. "The idea is to have an experience and try to expand the knowledge base of human beings, expand the awareness of things and also try to keep growing. I continue to evolve in my chosen craft of photography . . . Through my foundation, we're trying to reach a lot of young people and get them connected, and older people to reconnect, with the natural environment and its importance."

Never one to resist a challenge, Bondar works to combine her passions and educate the public on important environmental issues. "I have looked at migratory pathways of certain birds such as the whooping crane that nests in the northern part of Canada and the flies down to Texas every year or the arctic tern that goes to Canada to breed in the Arctic and then goes to the Antarctic every year to over winter.

"Those are very challenging things to do — birds are evanescent; they come and they go and sometimes people don't even know they're around but they are part of our life form on the planet. I like to photograph them in their environment and sensitize people to how much their habitats are endangered," said Bondar of one of her ongoing projects.

The current photographic exhibit is part of a series of events held in Nova Scotia this summer under the banner, Mabel Bell: Celebrating a Life & Legacy of Outstanding Nova Scotia Achievements in Art & Science. Bondar has an affinity for the work and interests of Mabel Bell and feels the collaboration between her foundation and the Bell project is a good fit.

"There's a lot of overlap," said Bondar, "in terms of the fact that she was a photographer, she enjoyed that. She was very much interested in social projects and making the community stronger . . . and her deep interest in flight — a lot of those things I share.

"She was way before my time and yet her influences are there now for other people be they anywhere and want to be inspired by women who've done great things . . . I continue to look back at the past because it teaches me who I am and teaches me what I probably represent to people of another generation."

As an accomplished woman in the fields of science and art, Bondar adds to the ongoing discussion on the promotion of the sciences to female students. "I prefer to talk about STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics) than STEM because I believe if we put the 'A' back where it belongs that people will probably be less intimidated if they understand that it's just a continuum from one part of the curve to the left or the right. Somewhere along that curve, through abstract art and abstract science, people will find a comfort level. I do believe that people are stronger if they have backgrounds in both."

Bondar's current photo exhibit marks the 25th anniversary of her space flight on Discovery. In the past quarter-century, commercial space flights have been launched and technological advances both in computer software and space vehicle composition have facilitated space exploration. "All of those things and trying to reach farther into the solar system and looking at asteroids and how we might mine them; they are incredibly important as we advance our civilization," said Bondar of recent developments.

While Bondar is no longer making space flights, she is constantly in the air. This summer she has criss-crossed Canada, making appearances in Nova Scotia both in Lunenburg and Baddeck. This week she heads to Africa to partner with a trust out of London, England working to facilitate education for young women.

"We do workshops on education, environment and science . . . My foundation has projects in Canada and internationally because I am very committed to try to get people to look at the natural environment and feel that it is important, because it is."



Roberta Bondar in her flight suit 25 years ago. (Contributed)