

Rustin fills her mother's rooms with love

Leiba Rustin has discovered the flip side of standing on an ocean cliff and feeling the power of Creation.

It is standing in her late mother's apartment and feeling the beloved imprint of the physical minutiae of life.

She achieves this through her newest art series and discovers that the two are not so separate. Both feelings connect to the elemental sensation of being alive, both underline the transience of human life on earth, and both inspire a love that's so powerful, it brings a full ache to your heart.

Even the stranger, seeing Rustin's pastels for the first time, will feel that connection.

Until June 30 at Galerie de la Ville in the Dollard Cultural Centre, 12001 de Salaberry Blvd., Dollard des Ormeaux, Rustin is showing "Sing Softly, Zing Shtil," named for her mother's favourite Yiddish lullaby.

The series of 10 large pastels, along with six older works, are a quiet homage, a lullaby to her mother who three years ago, at age 88, went to her rest, as well as a lullaby of nostalgia, comforting the artist's own sense of loss.

Each work is a view of a room or part of a room, full of furniture, knickknacks, and the gentle clutter of living. Human presence has left a domestic footprint of items that are placed, piled, stored and arranged.

A nutcracker is still poised on a bowl of walnuts, and throw cushions on a sofa seem to bear the impression of a recent nap. A telephone cord is twisted from innumerable conversations with family and friends. Geraniums on a window sill continue to struggle toward the light.

The images are both intensely personal and universal, as each viewer is able to fit themselves into the environment and feel a familiarity, as if it was their own.

Adding to the intimacy is the abundance

of crochet handwork decorating the home, such as a brightly coloured afghan on the couch, a seat cushion on a rocking chair and a spread on the narrow bed her widowed mother slept in.

The white bedspread with its squares of crocheted flowers is so tactile that you can only marvel at Rustin's artistic talent in depicting it.

The artist has used an unusual technique to give the otherwise static views a dynamic presence and three-dimensionality. She coats her oil pastel drawings with diluted, black India ink, then

scrapes it off in diagonal striations, leaving more of the black pigment where there's shadow and less where there are highlights.

The results are rich and tweedy in texture. In this manner, walls and other flat surfaces are infused with energy and substance.

Rustin has worked in unorthodox ways before. After her father died in the late 1990s, she used raw plywood as the support for her coloured pencil and pastel pigments, incorporating the wood grain as part of the texture.

Past themes have included flowers, trees, the Jewish blessings for the myriad of life's gifts and occurrences, horses symbolically racing death, still lifes, her parents' country home (which is also a well of memories), and surprisingly touching portraits of carp.

"When I was little, my bubbie used to keep live carp, which she carried home from the market, in the bathtub. I loved nature. I would go upstairs, make friends with the carp and then when they were gone, I'd ask, 'Bubbe, where's the carp?' I don't think she told me directly, but sooner or later I figured it out. I always felt sorry for the fish," says Rustin, who recreated the empathy she felt in graceful drawings on green linen paper.

The Galerie de la Ville exhibit is perhaps the most important of her career, and it's in-

stilled with an urgency born of her own brush with mortality.

Two years ago this July, she found a lump in her breast and endured successful surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatment that left her "feeling nuked inside. But I would come to my studio and keep working. This series was sustaining me."

While in the throes of her crisis, she was able to both reconnect with and let go of her mother. "Drawing was like caressing and saying goodbye to every single object. I was also honouring them, because when you draw something, you really have to look at it," she says.

Rustin was also expressing her joy in the



Leiba Rustin drew her late mother's environs as if she had just stepped out of them.
[Heather Solomon photo]

physical world. "I love this place: the smells, the colours, the textures. I don't want to leave. My art is a way of controlling it, grabbing hold."