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## MARQUEE SHOW AI tools democratize the ability to create: McDonald

by Trina Berlo  
Artificial intelligence is going to change everything, says **Steve McDonald**, who is building the marquee show at this year's Creemore Festival of the Arts around the topic of Adapt and Evolve.

Taking a somewhat controversial stance, he is embracing AI technology in art, and instead of fighting it, is helping to shape it.

"The reason why I love these tools is they democratize the ability to create," said McDonald. "No longer will technical ability be the thing that holds people back. That gate-keeping is gone."

In his Dunedin studio, where a light breeze enters through doors left ajar so the cats can go in and out, and the sound of the river is audible through the open window, McDonald talks excitedly about the technology as an illustration tool. His palette is no longer paints or lead, it is a digital library of his own work that he uses to create.

"I don't define art in narrow categories," says McDonald. "Since the 80s I have used every tool available to me."

He says he has always been an image crafter, a label he is comfortable

with, openly using AI to assist in the creation of his future realist illustrations, which are defining this third phase of his career.

McDonald says he has never taken a traditional approach to art and his process of constructing images has served him well as the technology advanced.

Since his days at The Ontario College of Art and Design, McDonald says he has been a mixed media artist, incorporating photography, collage and anything else to help him get the image in his head onto the page. AI is the first tool that has truly enabled him to do that.

"My art is an extension of my imagination, not an extension of my talent," says McDonald.

His style has evolved from painterly to the line drawings that define the second phase of his career. As a founding member of the artist collective Drawnward, McDonald showed work to acclaim in galleries for over two decades. He then created five volumes of award winning colouring books beginning with *Fantastic Cities*, with Chronicle Books in San Francisco, one of the first modern colouring books created, which has sold over half a million copies.

Creemore Festival of the Arts will include a pre-show of McDonald's current work, *Nature's Cathedral*.

The work will be shown Sept. 30 and Oct. 1 at Station on the Green, where McDonald will be stationed both days to share more about AI and how people can get set up to use it. People are encouraged to drop in and bring their questions and devices to access open source images and begin their own exploration. No preparation is necessary, and no artistic ability is required.

On Sunday, Oct. 1 McDonald will deliver a more formal presentation beginning at 11 a.m., followed by a Q&A to open up a conversation. The goal is to have an open and inviting session for participants and spectators.

In addition to the history and uses of AI, McDonald will be getting into the topics of ethics and creative integrity.

"These AI tools are brand new and don't just exist in image making," says McDonald. "They will be prevalent in all aspects of our lives."

McDonald has been working with AI creators and does not shy away from the debate about ethics and creative integrity. He points to periods in time when artists shunned emerging technology, like the camera.

In his creative process McDonald layers his work starting with something he's drawn on a tablet, eventually altering it by applying transformation models that he has designed using his own archive of work, photographs and colour schemes. When he runs one of his images through the models it comes out looking like his own work

but with the desired transformative style.

That is his process but McDonald says he is not critical of other artists who use the vast archive of open source digital images that is available to them. He also won't shy away from a debate about stylistic copyright and ownership of art when it comes to who can be influenced by what.

"It's a thing that artists are scared of but we should be helping to guide it. We should be developing a set of ethics around it."

"Once you put work out there you can't control it," says McDonald recognizing the big question is, "Do we want to be proprietary or do we want to be an open source society?"

McDonald is showing new work at a Toronto gallery this month.

*Nature's Cathedral*, a combination of analog, digital and diffusion, is exhibiting at Riverdale Hub in Toronto's east end beginning Oct. 4, with photography by his daughter **Roxana Pye McDonald**. There is a meet-the-artists reception on Thursday, Oct. 19 from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. with an artist talk at 7 p.m.

McDonald says he supports the gallery's mission to sustain a vibrant organization that balances the socio-economic, cultural, environmental and artistic needs and aspirations of minority communities. The Riverdale Hub Gallery is dedicated to employing the transformative power of art to engage Toronto's east-end community, connect with other communities across the city, and provide a platform for local, national, and global conversations.



During the Creemore Festival of the Arts, find Steve McDonald's pre-show of *Nature's Cathedral* at Station on the Green, 10 Caroline St. E., from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Sept. 30 and Oct. 1. A presentation and Q&A will take place at 11 a.m. on the Sunday, the rest of the programming is drop-in. Sponsored by Royal LePage Locations North Brokerage.

Opposite page: **Steve McDonald** at work in his Dunedin studio; New work from *Nature's Cathedral* - *Summer Garden*; Above: *An Island in Time*; Front page: *The Colours of Old Growth*.

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705. 446. 2506

Photos by Lorne Bridgman