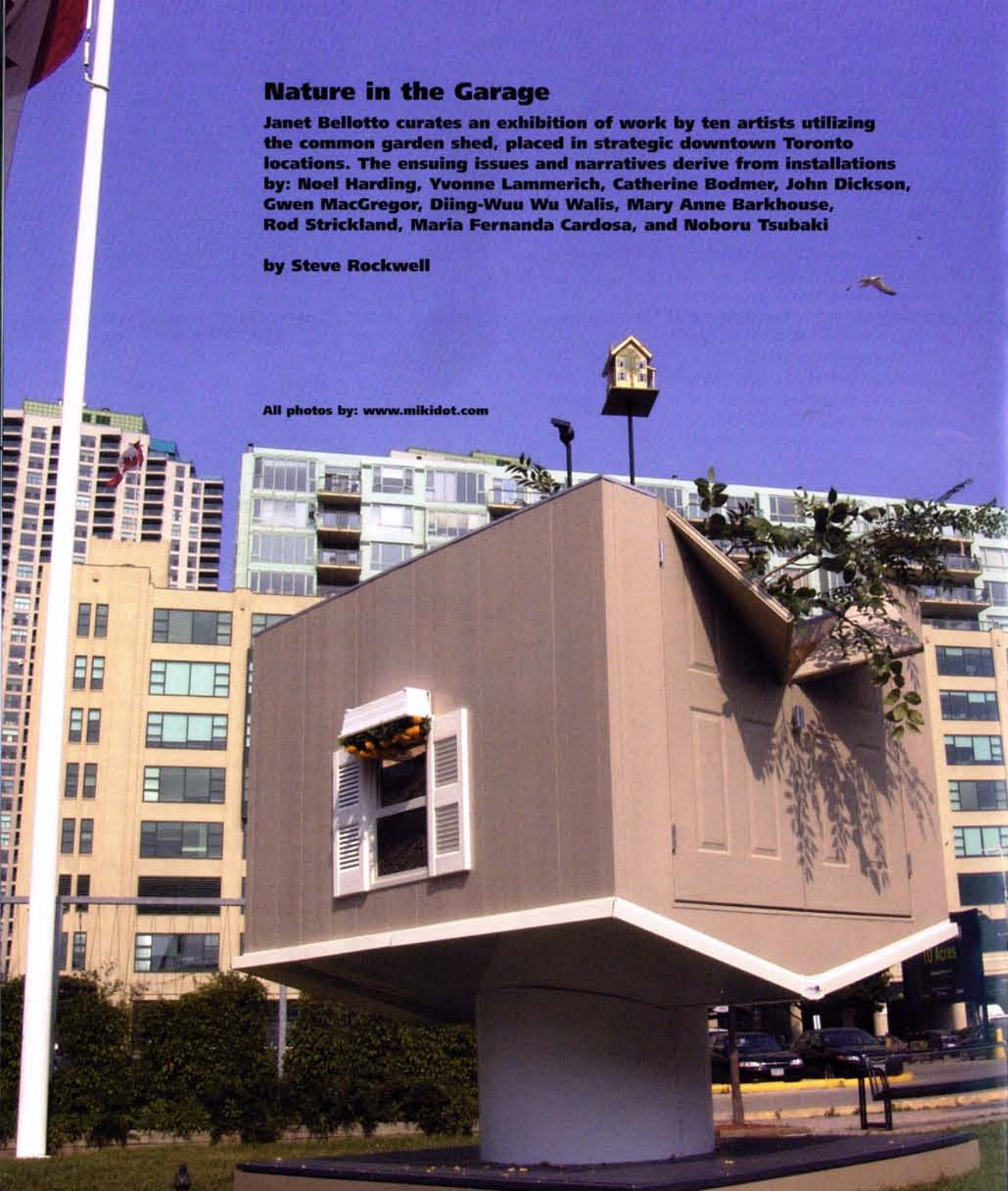


Nature in the Garage

Janet Bellotto curates an exhibition of work by ten artists utilizing the common garden shed, placed in strategic downtown Toronto locations. The ensuing issues and narratives derive from installations by: Noel Harding, Yvonne Lammerich, Catherine Bodmer, John Dickson, Gwen MacGregor, Diing-Wuu Wu Walis, Mary Anne Barkhouse, Rod Strickland, Maria Fernanda Cardoso, and Noboru Tsubaki

by Steve Rockwell

All photos by: www.mikidot.com



Yvonne Lammerich, *Island*, 2006, garden shed installation at Harbourfront, Toronto

Just days before the *Nature in the Garage* exhibition was to close and be dismantled, city health officials swooped down on Montreal artist Catherine Bodmer's Harbourfront installation *Pause* with an aim to cut its exhibition life span short, if even by a few days. Bodmer had lined the walls of her garden shed with stacks of large water bottles, filled half-way, their gaping mouths pointing to the shed's interior. Having started with pure water and the introduction of a few strains of competing water algae weeks into the exhibition, Bodmer's "mood ring" had gone from crystal to a murky pond green – and had clearly soured the disposition of the city's health patrol.

Pause merely represented a system of contained but uncontrolled growth, emphasizing the stop-and-go dynamic of nature's dialectic with the urban environment. As such, the piece was an unqualified success.

Noel Harding's *A Chirp* became the largest bird feeder one will likely ever see, at least in an urban setting. Flipped

Left: Noel Harding, *A Chirp*, 2006, garden shed installation at Harbourfront, Toronto

on its back with 80 sq. ft. open garden shed and filled about halfway with a variety of seed and nut, I would think that the "chirp" was just the clang of an enormous dinner bell with the human translation "Come and get it." Yet, I couldn't help but read a little mischief into Harding's installation,

Catherine Bodmer, *Pause*, 2006, garden shed installation at Harbourfront, Toronto



since the welcome mat rolled out by human urban dwellers has not always included all of our avian and earthbound friends.

The *A Chirp* installation was originally designed with a circular hole at the base of the piece. The intention was to provide an entrance for terrestrial furry scampers to come and help themselves to the nut and seed buffet upstairs. Alas, city officials saw fit to plug this end of the gravy train. In the trail of booty left on the grass by gleeful squirrels, were peanuts – potentially deadly to children with peanut allergies. Completely understandable. Still, Harding had found a way, in a single grand act of generosity, to give back to nature what we as a species seemed to have chipped away from our distant zoological relations bit by bit over the course of time.

The most aesthetically pleasing treatment of the garden shed itself was Toronto artist Yvonne Lammerich's *Island*. Perforated, stripped of its roof like a contemporary ruin, and anchored into the Harbourfront pond with the added shimmer of Lake Ontario in the background, gave the installation an immediate airy lyricism. It was the only shed that didn't require entrance to be appreciated. Lammerich's intention was



John Dickson, *Diorama*, 2006, installation at Fort York, Toronto

to create a visual Shangri-la, and coupled with the white oregami-like paper boat structure that she had constructed, our imaginary journey to Paradise was furnished with its boat of Charon.

Toronto sculptor and installation artist John Dickson explores humanity's tenuous relationship with the natural world. He likes to exhibit in non-gallery situations, which has led him to involvement in collective projects such as *Nether Mind*, *Persona Volare*, and alternative venues like *The Tree Museum*. Upon entering his *Diorama* at Old Fort York, the viewer was seemingly dropped into a rabbit hole. Taking advantage of a steep slope at the edge of the lawn, Dickson's construction, when crammed with tree branches, managed to appear bottomless in the darkened shed. While other exhibitors such as Bodmer in her *Pause* had sought the light, Dickson presented a journey of the imagination into the mythical Black Forest of the Brothers Grimm. It led me to ponder the extent to which nature is simply a human mental construct.

Nonreturnable (Version 2) by Toronto artist Gwen MacGregor used 4,000 broken clay smoking pipes dating from 1650 to 1850 that she and her partner had mudlarked from the Thames River in London. The pipe continues to be a symbol of peace and exchange to the indigenous Mississauga band. It is here that MacGregor weaves together a tangled carpet of historical

connections. The transfer of the land upon which downtown Toronto (including Fort York) sits, was result of negotiations that took place between the Mississauga First Nations and the British government. While the treaty was signed in 1787, the terms of its transfer are still being debated to this day. Deposited into the Thames are the remnants of the twined historical threads between the New World and the Old. Her installation not only reminds us of the role that tobacco played in the past, but the extent to which it serves as a metaphor of the collapse of history into the present. For starters, the puff is gone but the pipe remains, as does

some of the wrangling over the land.

Taiwanese artist Diing-Wuu Wu Walis from Taipei focuses on aboriginal history and the preservation of aboriginal culture by harnessing digital media art tools against the invasion of mainstream culture in Taiwan and the Western World. Of aboriginal descent himself, Walis found that the Fort York site in particular resonated with his own work. He found it difficult, however, to grasp the origins of what had once existed there, and upon entering the site performed a ceremony to alleviate the disturbance to its Spirits. Working on the assumption that the present site was once teeming with animals invisible



Diing-Wuu Wu Walis, *free invisible animals*, 2006, garden shed installation at Fort York, Toronto



Gwen MacGregor, *Nonreturnable (Version 2)*, 2006, installation at Fort York, Toronto

to us in the present, Walis installed silhouetted cutouts of a variety of animals of Taiwanese origin to stimulate a symbolic or even magical interaction between aboriginal Taipei and Toronto. The signs that he made reminded me of shields, raised perhaps to ward off a continual cultural attack on indigenous human and animal habitats. Even if the invasion cannot be reversed, they serve as reminders of what must not be forgotten and serve as prods to retrieve what might have already been lost.

Environmental concerns and indigenous culture is also central to the art of Mary Anne Barkhouse of Minden, Ontario. Born in Vancouver, BC into the Nimpkish band, Kwakwaka'wakw First Nation, Barkhouse's art has made use of animal imagery – wolves, ravens, moose and beaver in a diversity of settings. In the *Nature in the Garage* installation at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, her subjects were wine and bats. This connective pairing is more than skin deep. Vampiric and cave associations aside, it's climate and temperature that matters most in the health and generation of wine and bats.

I made an attempt to reconcile the mosquito stained glass imagery with the wine cellar that Barkhouse had constructed in the shed. But, of course, bugs are the food of bats, while the food of mosquitos are our blood. From the vineyard of serious earth issues, Barkhouse served the viewer flight after flight of wry but full-bodied glimpses into the possibilities of art-making. Her crystalline bats were the inverted wine glasses that dripped like stalactites from the roof of her *Cellarium*. The bitter twist that Barkhouse alludes to, is that it is we as humans that drain the bats of their sanguine content, not the other way around.

Windsor, Ontario artist Rod Strickland has exhibited sculptural installations and digital imagery throughout North America. He has explored themes addressing the relationships between nature, industrial development, urban sprawl and complex technologies through various



Top: Mary Anne Barkhouse, *Cellarium*, 2006, installation at MOCCA, Toronto

Above: Rod Strickland, *Parkesine House*, 2006, installation at the Drake Hotel, Toronto



curatorial and community based projects such as the *Green Corridor*, an interdisciplinary community-based project that involved over 200 participants and brought fresh focus to the busiest international border crossing between Canada and the United States.

With Strickland's *Parkesine House* (and I write this with my tongue in my cheek) *Nature in the Garage* was graced with its most sadistic piece. Could the artist have anticipated how hot the summer was going to be? The

Forest fan in the wood-lined enclosed case blew on the branches on the monitor of a video of a tree – not on the tree itself, and more importantly, not on the viewers of his exhibit, who could have used the breeze the most.

The timely humor of the *Parkesine House* installation, however, was not lost on me, compounded by the fact that it served as the last stop on the bus tour of the ten installations, and the stop turned out to be at the only bar on route, the Drake Hotel.



Top: Noboru Tsubaki, *UN Shop*, 2006, installation at Toronto City Hall

Above: Maria Fernanda Cardoso, *A Garden of Insects that Look Like Plants*, 2006, installation view at Gallery 1313, Toronto

Colombian-born Maria Fernanda Cardoso has lived and worked in Sydney, Australia since 1997. Her use of animals and insects in her sculpture installations, videos and performances allow her to explore chaos and complexity theories. Through simple units, often minimally repeated, complex universal systems may be educated. This nano-compression is best exemplified by the internationally-exhibited *Cardoso Flea Circus*. Cardoso represented Colombia in the 50th Venice Biennale and created

her first Public Art work in conjunction with Miami Basel 2005. The fragile delicacy of her 'garden' construction for this project demanded close scrutiny. Through the camouflaged minutiae of the corpses of dead insects, a viewer could appreciate the macabre beauty of the stuff that remains after life has left.

Japanese artist Noboru Tsubaki is familiar with many mediums, having worked with large scale outdoor installations, robotic sculpture, interactive network pieces, and cultural community

projects. In October 2004 he visited Ramallah in Palestine to research production for *The Wall – Stories under Occupation 2*, a work created for Al-Kasaba Theatre, a play that became a forum for divergent views on history, while simultaneously playing television broadcasts of the bloody conflict that continues to take place in the Gaza strip. In the Japanese production, he set up seven walls of near actual size, a feature that he echoed in miniature in his *UN Shop* installation at Toronto's City Hall. Set within a municipally-functioning building, Noboru's *UN Shop* was often mistaken for an actual UN boutique. His activity center consisted of computers, tables, chairs, markers, scissors, and tape, etc., and blow-up portraits of ethnically diverse people from around the globe, with a portrait of George W. Bush, Colin Powell, and, well, Noboru Tsubaki himself. It was this doctored last touch that should have tipped the participant off to the gulf of difference between art and life. Even with Tsubaki's web project, *Radikal Dialogue*, which was created to encourage discussion of social issues between people all over the world, there remains a quixotic strain to an artist's intercession in world events. That fact, in no way, diminishes my admiration of Tsubaki in his effort and belief in the potential of the internet as a connector of humankind, and that through this global medium, peace and understanding might somehow be achieved through dialog.

During the course of the *Nature in the Garage* exhibition, Gallery 1313 was transformed into a central information hub where visitors viewed documentation of the artists' work, as well as obtaining their "passport" to visit all the locations. In the gallery, Janet Bellotto also curated the exhibition *No Such Place*, with work that stemmed from ideas of the exhibition in relation to nature and environment. The exhibiting artists were Stan Denniston, Andreas Hagenbach, Carolyn White and Walter Willems.