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Focus On: the Tree Museum

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Artists have long found inspiration in the pristine wilderness setting of Muskoka. The artists whose work makes up the Tree Museum, located on the shores of Ryde Lake near Gravenhurst, are no different ... and yet, they are. Where many have used nature in their art, here it is in reverse. Art is incorporated into nature to develop site-specific contemporary art that not only invites your participation; it requires it.

"Man and nature can't help but be the theme," says E.J. Lightman, co-curator with fellow artist Anne O'Callaghan. "We are human beings, artists changing nature. People ask, 'how do you do that?' It's our creative impulses to create a space, a beautiful place to hang out and be inspired."

Since 1997, over 40 artists have shown their work at the Tree Museum, from performance art to video to sculpture. More than 20 permanent installations remain on the 200-acre site for self-directed viewing year round. A sign accompanies each piece, listing the title,

artist and a short statement.

"A bridge to what the artist is all about," explains Lightman. "You have to use your imagination, interact with the piece and explore it. It is an art experience of a different kind ... exciting to kids, meant to be touched, handled and played on."

Because this is an outdoor gallery, nature has a profound effect on the exhibits, and each season brings a different view. In summer, visiting artists can be observed creating their work, preparing for the annual fall opening reception, this year Sept. 6. Artists Dyan Marie and Ed Pien will join the Tree Museum in 2009 for In Between, an exhibition that explores man's relationship to the current environment, both urban and rural, and the diminishing space between. Marie has been an exhibiting visual artist since the 1980s and is represented in Toronto by Wynick/Tuck Gallery. Pien teaches at the University of Toronto and has had exhibitions throughout the world, including New York, Montreal, Mexico City and Berlin.

Admission is free and visitors park at the entrance, off Doe Lake Road, where they will walk one kilometre to the first exhibit.

"Bring hiking boots," advises Lightman. "High heels won't work."

Allow at least an hour and a half to see all of the exhibits, she adds.

Visiting artists enjoy the Tree Museum's peaceful location and on-site cottage as a quiet place to relax and spend some time, choosing a spot to create and exhibit their work in an abundance of space with few limitations.

"There's no pressure to make something that has to sell," says Lightman, "so they are free to make something magical."

The Tree Museum is supported by Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. For directions, information or to donate, visit www.thetreemuseum.ca.



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