The Tree Museum, Gravenhurst, Ontario, Canada

by Gil McElroy

In her 1968 hit song "Big Yellow Taxi," Joni Mitchell mourns the "paving of paradise," noting that "they took all the trees/put 'em in a tree museum/and charged the people/a dollar and half just to see 'em." About 100 miles north of the city of Toronto, Ontario, lies the real Tree Museum, in a region of lakes and forest known as the Muskokas. For over 100 years, it's been a popular vacation retreat for urban Torontonians seeking to escape the summer heat. It's an area of golf courses, upscale cottages and resorts, camping sites, motels, and cabins. This is Cottage Country, and up here, the trees are free for the seeing, as is the Tree Museum itself.

The museum is located not far from the small town of Gravenhurst, best known as the birthplace of Dr. Norman Bethune, inventor of the mobile blood bank during the Spanish Civil War and later a hero of the Chinese Revolution. A sign at the edge of a secondary highway just south of town marks the Tree Museum's entrance, but it's a long walk into the woods along a winding dirt road, past a beaver dam that prevents a large pond from inundating a low-lying section of the only way in and out. At the end of the road, set on the shore of Ryde Lake, is a small house and some outbuildings. At various sites on the property, site-specific installations by a select group of contemporary Canadian artists are installed.

The museum is the brainchild of a handful of Ontario-based artists who banded together as the Tree Museum Collective in 1997, when they were offered use of this northern Ontario property owned by Mentor College, a private school located just outside of Toronto. The collective's first exhibition, mounted a year later, consisted of works by three artists spread across the Ryde Lake property. Not surprisingly, site-specificity was critical to the exhibition's success; the site's geological and topographical features—such as its many granite outcroppings, scoured clean and striated by retreating glaciers at the end of the last Ice Age—come heavily into sculptural play. Case in point: Tim Whiten's *Danse* (1998–99). Whiten has sandblasted four separate life-size figures—dancing skeletons, actually—into the exposed surface of a large, gently rounded granite hillock. Situated at points denoting the four cardinal points of the magnetic compass, his figures, though inspired by Hans Holbein's *Dance of Death*, have a more compelling relationship with the petroglyphs etched by ancient aboriginal peoples into rock surfaces at numerous sites not too far distant from here.

Badanna Zack's *A Mound of Cars* (1998) is, in many ways, Western culture's contemporary equivalent to petroglyphs. Using a number of abandoned cars found on site, which she stacked into a heap one atop the other, Zack created an enormous dirt- and sod-covered pyramid that she then sliced in half lengthwise, revealing the interior layers of rusted and wrecked automobile bodies like exposed geological strata. Zack's piece echoes the geological processes that, over the course of eons, have given particular shape to this part of Canada. At the same time, it reflects a mentality that views natural sites, wherever they might be found, as little more than dumping grounds for all things toxic, obsolete, or merely unwanted. Archaeological overtones in *A Mound of Cars* abound, pointed reminders of our species' need to comprehend the deeds and events of the past—our natural and cultural histories—in order to come to terms with the possible future.

Anne O'Callaghan's *Relic of Memory* (1998) thematically extends the evocation of the historical processes at play along the shores of Ryde Lake. A long,

Anne O'Callaghan, *Relic of Memory*, 1998, Welded steel table with laser-cut table, 2.5 x 8 x 2.8 ft.

Clockwise from right: Reinhard Reitzenstein, *Shed*, 2001. Poplar logs, 14 x 12 x 10 ft. Robert Wiens, *Log II*, 1999. Twigs, 112 ft. long, 4 ft. diameter. Lois Anderson and Simone Jones, *Tidal Pool: Ode to Tom Thomson*, 2001. Marine ply and mixed-media cylindrical units and motor-activated paddles.

low rectangular steel table—rusted from its exposure to the elements—sits on the high side of a sloped clearing in the bush atop moss-encrusted rock. A text is etched into the side of the table, words identifying some of the previous inhabitants of this place ("Huron—Hatherly—Ruttan") and words denoting more poetic elements of its natural history ("Petrified Wood—Dead Lava—Cooling Star"). Farther down the grade from the table, O'Callaghan has installed a skeletal framework of two rusted steel arches held together by a connecting ridge pole, minimally forging architectural allusions, perhaps, to early aboriginal structures, as well to the homes long abandoned by settlers unable to make a go of it in this difficult land, buildings left to stand vacant as nature, abhorring the vacuum, slowly reclaims that which it had temporarily been denied.

Since that first exhibition of three site-specific works, the Tree Museum has grown to include more than 10 pieces, including Robert Wiens's *Log II* (1999), a work of tree branches and twigs bundled and woven together to resemble a section of fallen tree in the midst of a small clearing near the shore of Ryde Lake. The most recent exhibition, "Finding the Intimate in Nature," which opened in fall 2002, added works by Ellen Dijkstra, who is accustomed to an always-inhabited Dutch pastoral landscape, and Lyla Rye, who grew up in Canada's vast expanses of wilderness. In 2001, Reinhard Reitzenstein came to the Tree Museum to build *Shed*. Working on an open section of the property some distance off the main road, he constructed a small shed using materials found on-site, covering its front with a façade of disks of wood cut from poplar logs to evoke the idea of the quintessential "log cabin" and then skewering the whole thing, puncturing the building with an entire poplar tree—branches and all—inserted through one side of the building and out its roof. Out of true and out of place, the poplar "world tree" grows up through that which it might otherwise shelter, wreaking structural and cultural havoc like some mythologically demented 21st-century version of *Tzuk te*, the Mayan world tree, or *Yggdrasil*, the Norse equivalent. No matter our efforts to push or hold back the wild—to "pave paradise"—in the end, it seems, the trees will always have the final say.

Gil McElroy's most recent book is Gravity & Grace: Selected Writing on Contemporary Canadian Art.

TOP AND RIGHT: ISAAC APPLEBAUM / LEFT: E.J. LIGHTMAN