



[Back to The Tree Museum](#)

## The Tree Museum

October 08, 2010

Peter Goddard

GRAVENHURST

You can have your Nuit Blanche. I almost had my Nuit Branch.

New site-specific installations from four intriguing artists — Canadians Penelope Stewart and Jeannie Thib and Australians Bev Hogg and Trish Roan — took me up Highway 11 north of here a few days ago, heading into The Tree Museum for off-road sculpture deep in Muskoka bush.

Parking the car near the entrance of The Tree Museum, just off Doe Lake Rd. East — I'd been warned that the hard-scrabble road was made impassable further in by overflow from the beaver dam— I tramped alone along a sopping trail in late afternoon. This had to be familiar turf for Thib, who'd gone to camp at Fairy Lake near here, and maybe even Stewart, another Torontonion. How did the Australians react?

About half-way in — at least as best I could remember it was half-way, because I'd already passed E.J. Lightman's *Skyshester* (2004), a ponderous



wedge of ancient rock face embraced by a modernist frame made from some 40 feet of industrial steel — I headed into the woods. Lightman is a founder of The Tree Museum, along with Anne O’Callaghan, who also has work on the site.

Guided by a series of brightly coloured strips attached to trees, I was led away from the main trail and deeper into the trees, across ancient rocks while twisting past rotting birches. Something glittered through the trees: dwindling light reflecting from the mirrored surfaces of an earlier work, John Dickson’s *Outhouse* (2007), being wrapped protectively at month’s end.

The overcast sky muted the fall colours as a wannabe winter breeze had set everything in motion. Things tingled and chilled in the approaching darkness. It was, as Aussie guest artist Roan says, “heavy with water.”

Great. I looked around. I wandered further. Not so great. I felt lost. Then a vestigial Rover Scout memory kicked in. Maybe I should start looking for branches for bedding.

“Sculpture is what you bump into when you back up to see a painting,” said American artist Barnett Newman. With The Tree Museum, now in its 13th season, sculpture is what you might trip over when you back up to see where a trail leads, which I did to get myself un-lost.

Cutting back down a slight slope to my left, I came to one of the standardized little blue Tree Museum signs signalling that a work was nearby: Hogg’s *View Finder - Breath*. An explanatory statement close at hand left me with the impression that maybe I wasn’t as isolated as I thought. The artist — now back in Australia, as I found out later — had reacted to the site almost exactly as I was. She too felt what she described as “the softness of the earth,” just as I was feeling it beneath my feet.

Consisting of a pair of horizontal beaver-gnawed sticks, each about as thick as your wrist, intersected at a mid-point by two bundles of vertically fixed twigs, *View Finder - Breath* forms a rough rectangle that suggests it might have been formed naturally, although it’s both a legacy and a refutation of ’60s minimalism. Understanding it either as a roughhewn picture frame for a micro-landscape or a woodsy version of a camera’s viewfinder, the piece creates spatial constraints and visual boundaries to border unconstrained wildness. Wanting to stay lost in this view chilled out any sense of panic I felt.



Canadian Jeannie Thib's installation piece for The Tree Museum's Muskoka bush site is titled *Equivalents* (Tree Museum) after Muniz, after Stieglitz.

SUE OBATA/COURTESY THE ARTIST

The sensuality of Muskoka landscape caught both Australian artists off guard. Its lushness differs from the “baked by sun” sense found in the Australian landscape, as artist Roan explained in an email. Then there’s the “constant motion” of the Muskoka bush that “keeps us alive.”

“I found it difficult not to romanticize the landscape in Muskoka,” added Roan, whose piece *Meridian* consists of tree-mounted mirrors and “acts as a sundial,” each mirror reflecting intersecting rays of light during moments when the sun is highest in the sky. Muskoka’s history mattered, “but the most honest way I could approach making an artwork” had “to do more with my immediate physical experience of being there.”

The two Canadian responses are more in a historical/analytical mode. Thib’s engrossing *Equivalents (Tree Museum) after Muniz, after Stieglitz*, consists of wispy cloud-like markings on birch bark and a moon made of pale marble looking up from its place on the ground. Nature couldn’t have done it better, even if the two aspects reflect a complex artistic process referencing contemporary Brazilian artist Vic Muniz’s response to Alfred Stieglitz’s *Equivalents*, a photographic series based on moonlit skies.

Penelope Stewart’s *Cloche*, an out-sized photograph of a bell jar mounted on both sides of a vinyl sheet, offers the illusion of actual transparency along with the possibility of seeing the surrounding bush through the non-existent glass. Is this a hint of the all-mall Muskoka of the near future, when the bush has become a theme park? Didn’t Joni Mitchell write a song about this?

The Tree Museum is open year round, although some work — Thib’s and Stewart’s in particular — comes down after Oct. 30. Information can be found at [www.thetreemuseum.ca](http://www.thetreemuseum.ca).

*Peter Goddard is a freelance writer. He can be reached at [peter\\_g1@sympatico.ca](mailto:peter_g1@sympatico.ca)*