

# Art grows in a forest

A unique museum invites artists to create works that flourish and decay with the trees that surround them, writes **SARAH MILROY**

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There is something wonderfully perverse about the name of the Tree Museum. Neither a museum (doesn't the term conjure images of security guards and thermally sealed underground vaults?) nor simply a collection of trees (a vision Ioni Mitchell immortalized in *Big Yellow Taxi*), this is, rather, an experimental outdoor project in which art is placed amid the trees — or carved into rock, or hidden away in busted-down tool sheds. And it doesn't cost a dollar and a half just to see it.

In fact, it's free — and not hard to get to. Heading north from Toronto, just turn right off Highway 11 onto the Doe Lake Road, north of Gravenhurst, Ont., and start looking for the sign. Not that it's screamingly obvious. The Tree Museum is all about hunting around in the landscape; the experience starts even before you get there.

A white, weather-beaten plywood sign announces the entrance. You turn in, park the car, and head into the bush on a rough little road, which at times deteriorates into open swaths of pre-Cambrian granite. At the end, a little clapboard building comes into view, and inside it the project's co-ordinator, E. J. Lightman — clad in laid-back, up-north attire and a baseball cap — waves hello from the window.

What I saw over the next two hours was various and quietly haunting: a scattering of spherical bales of white plastic, nestled amid the goldenrod in a grassy meadow; like giant cocoons (Ellen Dijkstra); a little pioneer shed with a tree growing through it (Reinhard Reitzenstein); a thick bundle of sticks in the shape of a felled log (Robert Wiens); a pile of abandoned car chassis and parts, dug into an embankment in sedimentary layers (Badanna Zack); a disconcertingly merry consort of skeletons playing drums, horns and bagpipes, all sandblasted into a granite outcropping (Tim Whiten).

Without Lightman and her co-ordinator and fellow artist Anne O'Callaghan, none of these works would be here. This is one of those grassroots projects that has evolved through good luck, good karma and, from time to time, little injections of cash to keep a good idea afloat. The 80 hectares of land belong to Mentor College in Mississauga, Ont., a private school with an outdoor-education focus (Lightman's husband, Ed Steinberg, is one of the principals). The Tree Museum, now in its fifth year, has the run of the land and the little house, where the artists stay while conceiving and constructing their works.

"We were always up here all summer," says Lightman, who has a cottage across the lake, "and my



Part of Tim Whiten's consort of musical skeletons: Quietly haunting.

kids were growing up. One of them had moved out, and the other one was off at camp. It could get kind of isolated. Now there is always this wonderful activity."

Only now are the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council chipping in on the costs. (Together, the two agencies provided \$16,000 last year.) Though she squirms to confess it, it seems that the start-up came out Lightman's own pockets, and those of a few like-minded friends.

She should stop squirming, and take a bow. What they have created is a most unusual platform for the creation of new works. Wiens, for one, who has been involved in a number of outdoor sculptural commissions over the years, says one of the most interesting things about working with the Tree Museum was the possibility of exploring art's relationship to time in a new way.

Some of Wiens's earlier works had consisted of startlingly real sculptural facsimiles of logs, made out of wood and painted, and exhibited in art galleries — forays into the idea of fake nature. "I saw those as antimonuments," he says,

"something you would trip over rather than look up to. I look at this piece as a continuation of that."

But what happens when the work is subjected to the seasons and begins to change? Wiens's bale of twigs is starting to settle, looking less like a log and more like, say, a beaver dam, or a cache of firewood — a more generalized sign of human or animal industriousness, hidden away in the forest.

For Toronto artist Lyla Rye, a commission from the Tree Museum was her first opportunity to make art for an outdoor location. (Artists are offered \$1,200 to complete their works, a lean fee that includes material costs.) "I make video," she says with a laugh. "What do I know about outdoor sculpture?"

In fact, Rye had made a number of sculptural works based on architectural ideas, some relating to makeshift shelters, before she turned to electronic media, but it seemed wrong to turn back the stylistic clock to find a ready solution. Despite her preparatory readings — which included a Grimm's tale about a juniper tree (she had become interested in a juniper that

she had found on the property) — nothing was coming of her efforts.

Then, on one visit to the museum, while driving in with her mother and tiny daughter, she got stuck in the mud. There was nothing for it but to head out in search of help. Across a nearby field, she found a farmer with a tractor willing to help. Their conversation turned to the changes in the landscape and the animals that live in it. Rye had spent her childhood summers at nearby Fairy Lake. He talked about the mysterious disappearance of frogs in the area some years back, and how they later returned, after the outlawing of DDT.

The conversation reminded her of the themes of regeneration in the Grimm's tale. "It all sort of came together," she remembers. She inscribed the farmer's story into a flaring ring of black rubber, and laid it out on the level ground beneath the tree. To read the text, you must walk a circular path.

Rye says the landscape exerts a sort of seduction that she was a pains to resist. "It's really easy to slip into this pastoral beauty, to mance thing," she says.

Like Wiens, she revelled in the distinct quality of the setting. "Usually, when an artist is doing art outdoors in the city, you have to always be thinking about how you can make the thing vandal-proof." The audience is the enemy here. The vandal may be of a gentler and more insidious type. In the upper rafters of Reitzenstein's shed a wasp nest is quietly blooming. Lichen is spreading a grey veil over Whiten's covorting skeletons.

Sometimes the mischief begins before the work is erected.

"Originally," says Rye, "the juniper tree was going to be like a sort of throne. When we first went up in the spring, there was this incredible view. The juniper stood out, all or its own in the middle of this beautiful, elevated place. But when we came back to make the work at the end of July," she adds with a laugh "the view was gone. The grass that had been a foot high was now four feet high. You couldn't see anything."

The flexibility demanded of the artists is likewise required of the viewer. "People are used to coming to an art gallery and spinning around and leaving," says Lightman. "But this is two hours of working and it's physical."

For Wiens, that's the best part. "The viewer comes upon the art," he says. "They are searching it out. That just doesn't happen on Spadina Avenue."

*Artists who have made works at the Tree Museum will be showing their plans and related pieces at the York Quay Gallery at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre, in an exhibition that opens on Sept. 20. On Sept. 22, the public is invited to a special event at the Tree Museum from noon to 5 p.m., to mark the launch of new pieces by Lyla Rye, Ellen Dijkstra and Wilson Chik.*