

# Art among the trees

*Fall is the time to show off the latest acquisitions at Muskoka's most unusual museum and gallery*

By MIRANDA BRITTON

Over the past few weeks, a small group of contemporary artists has been convening at a cabin on Ryde Lake near Gravenhurst in order to discuss, create and install this year's additions to the Tree Museum.

Initiated in 1998, the Tree Museum is an outdoor art gallery managed by a collective of artists, all of whom are interested in creating permanent or semi-permanent outdoor art installations that challenge the viewer to reconsider their rela-

tionship with nature.

To date, a total of 13 contemporary Canadian artists, including curator E.J. Lightman, have become involved in the Tree Museum. Located on 100 acres of land owned by Mentor College, the Tree Museum has been a labour of love for Lightman. "It has been so interesting to work with all of these artists," she says. "For me, the process of putting together each of the pieces is the best part."

The type of art that one finds at the Tree Museum is not typical of Muskoka. Drawing from their back-

grounds in conceptual art, the Tree Museum artists have taken a very cerebral approach to art making, producing pieces that need to be explored both aesthetically and intellectually.

Accustomed to exhibiting their work in prominent national and international galleries, the artists were all enthusi-

astic about the concept of the Tree Museum, welcoming the opportunity to create art that is both inspired by and integrated into the natural landscape.

To achieve this connection with the local landscape, many of the artists have used materials found on the property. An old shed has become a sound installation that erupts with the electronic sound of birds when the door is opened and then drops into a deadly silence when the door slams shut.

A collection of derelict cars found on the property have been stacked on top of each other and partially buried to depict a futuristic archaeological dig. Other artists have chosen to work with the recorded history of the property, incorporating the names of settlers, surveyors, previous owners and plant species into their work. "We don't want the artists to spend a lot of money," explains curator Lightman. "We encourage them to use what's already here on the property."

Although the Tree Museum is accessible to the public throughout the year, an official month-long exhibition is held

each fall. This year, the exhibition will be entitled "Artificial Nature" and will feature two new pieces, one created collaboratively by Lois Andison and Simone Jones and another created by Reinhard Reitzenstein.

The exhibition is meant to showcase new additions to the Tree Museum, but it is also a chance to see how some of the older pieces have aged or changed. "Initially, I didn't realize that the artists would want to come back to maintain their pieces, but Badanna has come back each year to work on her cars, and Anne O'Callaghan has gone out of her way to continue to help," says Lightman, adding that some of the artists prefer to leave their pieces alone, allowing nature to gradually take over.

Although all of the pieces may not appeal to everyone's understanding of art, the exhibition does provide an opportunity to see what is happening in the world of contemporary art without having to visit a major urban centre. At the very least, a visit to the Tree Museum is a great way to spend a cou-

ple of hours outside on a fall day.

One of the best times to visit the Tree Museum is during the run of "Artificial Nature", as artist's talks will be held each weekend throughout the run of the show. The exhibition opens on September 23, with a reception from noon until 5 p.m.

Each Saturday and Sunday, until the close of the exhibition on October 31, artist's talks will commence from the access point on Doe Lake Road at 1 p.m. The collective is also offering a special day for student groups on Monday, September 24.

To get to the Tree Museum follow Muskoka Road 6/Doe Lake Road east from Highway 11 (at Gravenhurst Bethune Drive exit). Follow Muskoka Road 6 for 8 kilometres until you see the Tree Museum sign on your right. All visitors are asked to park just inside the entrance as the road through the property is not fit for public use.

For further information visit the Tree Museum's Web site at [www.rhen.com/treemuseum/](http://www.rhen.com/treemuseum/) or contact E.J. Lightman at (416) 638-5082 or (705) 687-6008.



"A MOUND OF CARS" is one of the site-specific outdoor art installations that can be viewed at the Tree Museum, an outdoor art gallery that occupies 100 acres near Gravenhurst. Using old cars found on the property, Toronto artist Badanna Zack has created an installation that resembles a futuristic archaeological site.

Photos by Miranda Britton



"DANCE OF DEATH". Tim Whiten, a visual arts professor from York University, has created four sandblasted depictions of skeletons on an exposed section of rock. A contributor to the Tree Museum's first exhibition in 1998, Whiten has returned regularly to continue working on this piece.