

Visual Arts



BILL SANDFORD FOR THE TORONTO STAR

A sculpture by Badanna Zack — crushed car parts buried in the earth at the Tree Museum near Gravenhurst — take on the look of an archeology dig as nature gradually moves in.

Tree Museum artists include mother nature

The works change with the seasons



Peter Goddard

GRAVENHURST—Before heading out in the car to visit the Tree Museum deep in the Muskoka bush just north of here, I worried whether I would be in the right frame of mind to appreciate this backwoods gallery or its new exhibition, "Responding to Nature," opening tomorrow.

The initial attraction was the promise of new work from artists I liked: Peter von Tiesenhausen, Diane Borsato and Kelly Mark. Their pieces would be added to earlier sculpture that's survived the seasons on the nine-year-old site.

Liking artists might not be enough, I worried. Land art frequently brings out the tree-hugger in a lot of people. And tree hugging is as foreign to my makeup as listening to a Joan Baez medley.

But there was something deeply familiar in the experience of heading around the sudden twists and turns of Doe Lake Rd. east of Hwy 11, and in passing Precambrian rocks only to get slowed to a snail's pace behind some good old boys, weathered as the stone, crawling along in their ancient pickups.

The familiarity had to do with danger. This area is hard on humans and our creations. Way back when, several friends of mine, hot-footing it from the cops probably, lost control on this road and pasted their old jalopy onto the side of some of these rocks, lucky to survive.

This memory became clear upon the sight of Badanna Zack's twisted sculpture deep in the museum, made of car parts and thrust into a small mound of earth. Swatches of colour left over from old paint jobs look vivid in the surrounding rust.

Zack's fabulous wreck speaks more to the futility of man's achievements than a solitary hot-rod accident. Either way, it couldn't be better situated. The Muskoka environment is grinding it down and swallowing it whole. And maybe that's the most satisfying aspect of the Tree Museum — the general

toughness of the setting and the tough-mindedness brought to the enterprise by the artist-founders, E.J. Lightman and Anne O'Callaghan, to what otherwise could have become a tree-hugging paradise.

"A piece of sculpture or a painting goes in a gallery and remains the same," O'Callaghan says as we sit in the back of the reconstituted farm garage that houses the museum office, a mini-gallery and temporary home for visiting artists. "But everything up here is likely not to remain the same."

Across the table from us is Lightman, who has a cottage across the lake, and David Liss of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art in Toronto, this year's curator.

We're well over a kilometre into the bush from Doe Lake Rd., past the bright blue sign announcing the museum, the modest parking spot with its view of a meadow surrounded by a rusty fence, and past the symbols denoting a work of art in the vicinity.

"The work changes as the seasons change," O'Callaghan continues. "Nature becomes the backdrop. A number of pieces have totally been taken over by the meadow, by the wild flowers and by the grasses. Even pieces we've thought of as permanent have an impermanent quality to them."

She's thinking about *Outpost* (2003), by Francesca Vivenza. Only by clambering over a ridge of rocks can you reach *Outpost*, a pair of wooden doors painted a vivacious blue, lying flat and made to overlap to form a wonky-looking rectangle. It is of course the ubiquitous Muskoka diving board. It's also a window on the sky. It probably won't survive the winter. (The Tree Museum stays open all year.)

Liss sought out von Tiesenhausen because the Albertan is arguably one of the country's leading environmental artists. For his piece, von Tiesenhausen has roamed the 160-hectare site, marking hundreds of trees with eye-shaped incisions in the bark. The trees are watching.

Liss invited Mark, on the other hand, because the Toronto-based artist could not be less of an environmentalist.

"You want to invite artists for whom the situation will be suitable, or in the case of Kelly Mark, an artist not suited to the situation," says Liss, remembering the number of times Mark resolutely turned him down be-



BILL SANDFORD PHOTOS FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Guest curator David Liss mows an installation by Toronto artist Kelly Mark. Below, images in Tim Whiten's work are blasted into the rock.

fore grudgingly giving in. "Either way, artists will respond to these situations. My role is to create a context for artists to do what they do."

Mark only agreed to do a Tree Museum piece — an isolated patch of lawn, no more — because she knew it probably wouldn't be visible after more than a few weeks. Period.

Borsato's piece — an audio work in the Janet Cardiff mould where the museum visitor gets an idiosyncratic audio guide of the site — is intended to create an experience that "comes halfway" between von Tiesenhausen's and Mark's, says Liss.

In fact, Borsato's sound walk is sufficiently quirky — the Montreal artist makes the Muskoka trees sound creepy, offering no apologies to the Group of Seven — to carve out a niche all its own. (It's a downloadable mp3 file available at the Tree Museum website, thetree-museum.ca.)

Until recently, land art represented the last great macho art enterprise, with guys wielding buzz saws through the bush or bulldozers through the landscape — think Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* in Utah's Great Salt Lake.

The Tree Museum taps into environmental art's post-macho phase, one shaped by the realization that no matter how tough you are or how durable the work is, "there's always that battle against nature," Liss says. "Nature is the ally and the enemy up here."

"Respond to Nature" is at The Tree Museum until Oct. 30.

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