

# Art meets landscape

Article by Dawn Huddleston  
Photographs by Laura Bombier

Muskoka's beauty has long provided inspiration for artists. At The Tree Museum, an outdoor gallery near Gravenhurst, they are challenged to see both our landscape and their art in a new light. And this year's exhibition, opening in September, is adding a fresh perspective to the mix.

Australian artists Bev Hogg and Trish Roan have been invited to create installations for the site. Their new works, along with those of Ontario artists Penelope Stewart and Jeannie Thib, will be unveiled at the Sept. 5 opening of the exhibition, called *after-Landscape*.

"How Trish and Bev see things and the questions they ask have made us look at the site with new eyes," says Anne O'Callaghan, co-curator of The Tree Museum. "It's a totally different landscape than they're used to."

Exhibiting artists are presented with the challenge of selecting a location for their work and then creating a piece that complements the landscape. Local artists often visit the site multiple times while developing their ideas. For foreign artists, like Hogg and Roan, the task is much more demanding.

"They see the site for the first time when they arrive to do work," says O'Callaghan. They have just one month to conceive, plan and execute their designs. "There is so much to choose from. It's a complex landscape."

Artists are selected for their potential to engage with the site. Canadians Stewart and Thib have both created works in unconventional settings. Australians Hogg and Roan were invited to participate for their perspectives on diverse landscapes. While other foreign artists have been invited to create installations at the site, this is the first time a multi-year exchange has taken place.



An installation called *Cloche*, by artist Penelope Stewart, is put into place at The Tree Museum (above). Ed Pien uses optical play in his art (right).








E.J. Lightman, Lynn Campbell, Ric Amis, Bev Hogg, Trish Roan, Anne O'Callaghan, Penelope Stewart and twins Romi and Sari Lightman take time out from working on the new installations.



John Dickson's mirrored piece, Outhouse, is one of the exhibits at the Tree Museum (left). Anne O'Callaghan's piece, Relic of Memory, aims to reconstruct the natural and human histories of the site (above).





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**A mound of Cars, by Badanna Zack, blends into the earth at The Tree Museum.**

In 2007, co-curators O'Callaghan and E.J. Lightman were introduced to Barbara McConchie, the then-director of Craft ACT: Craft and Design Centre in Canberra, Australia. All liked the idea of an exchange program between Canada and Australia and the multi-year project *afterLandscape* was born. The exhibition is a collaboration between The Tree Museum and five Australian arts organizations, all located in Canberra – Craft ACT, Namadgi National Park, the Australia National University School of Art, Canberra Glassworks and Megalo Print Studio.

To begin the exchange, Ontario artists Penelope Stewart and Jeannie Thib travelled to Australia with O'Callaghan and Lightman in 2009. They will join Australian artists Bev Hogg and Trish Roan in creating installations at The Tree Museum this year. All four artists will be reunited at a 2012 exhibition at Craft ACT: Craft and Design Centre in Canberra, Australia.

It's a unique opportunity for the artists to explore their work in a new setting.

"It's a privilege to be part of this wonderful project," says Bev Hogg. "And it's great to have a site where people are invited to respond to this very special environment."

Hogg is a sculptural ceramic artist with a passion for the environment.

"It's the water here that captivated me," she says. "Things in Australia are dying because of lack of water. I'm exploring that contrast between absence and fullness."

She expects that her work will be ephemeral, lasting less than a year. "I understand there's a lot of snow here," she laughs.

Trish Roan plans to examine the effect of time and natural phenomena on her work. Trained as a glass artist and often using mixed materials in her work, Roan is looking for ways to incorporate sunlight or wind into her installation.

"It's amazing to be able to approach work in this way," says Roan. "You can't take things for granted when you're in an unfamiliar place. I'm looking very hard at the environment and at my own responses to it."

The effects of nature are what make The Tree Museum so different from a traditional art gallery. Sun, wind, rain and animals may alter the pieces over time while the seasons provide a constantly changing experience for visitors.

"We are always amazed at the overwhelming positive response to the work," says O'Callaghan. "Often the work draws attention to the rocks, the moss, and the amazing beauty of the Muskoka landscape."

To date, 61 artists have created works at the site. When a work is no longer representative of the artist's original concept, it is often removed at the artist's request. Twenty-six permanent installations remain, including those from the first exhibition in 1998.

The Tree Museum was established in 1997 when E.J. Lightman recognized the rare opportunity to promote contemporary sculpture in a remote, natural setting. She invited Anne O'Callaghan to co-curate the site.

Lightman, owner of The Tree Museum site, and O'Callaghan are both Toronto-based mixed-media artists who have exhibited internationally. They are passionate about promoting art and making it accessible. More than just organizing annual exhibitions, their involvement in the site is hands-on. They help artists to gather materials or install work, clearing dead trees, and shovelling gravel to repair the road.

They are helped in their tasks by other members of The Tree Museum collective, which includes J. Lynn Campbell, John Dickson, Lyla Rye, Francesca Vivenza, Badanna Zack, Deeter Hastenteufel, Tim Whiten, and Jocelyne Salem Belcourt. They are supported by Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.

Located on a 200-acre woodland site east of Gravenhurst, The Tree Museum holds surprises for visitors at every turn. Beaver dams and wildflowers mingle with contemporary sculptures made of wood, metal, found materials and even old cars.

"We work hard to keep a light footprint," says O'Callaghan. There are few permanent pathways; if a work is removed the path is allowed to grow over. With time, it is impossible to tell where a previous installation has been. The result is an organic interaction between nature, art and people. "When people come to look at the work they see the landscape anew."

Local families and cottagers have made visits to the site an annual ritual to discover what's new. It's a hands-on experience that is equally enjoyable for both children and adults. Unlike a traditional gallery, the pieces here are meant to be touched, explored, and even played on.

A new exhibition opens each September, with

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**A Chirp, by Noel Harding, is a reminder of the precarious conditions.**

plans for the 2011 installations already in place. Five artists, chosen by a jury of past participating artists, will create sound sculptures.

The site is open year-round for self-guided tours, but with the new exhibition opening, September is an ideal time to visit. Exhibiting artists, both past and present, are available on opening day to discuss their works.

Whenever you choose to visit, walking shoes are recommended. It is a hike in the woods, after all, but one of the few where you can find art around every corner. Allow several hours to see all of the exhibits, or bring a picnic lunch and stay for the day. 



**The Tree Museum blends subtly into Muskoka's landscape.**



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