

Penelope Stewart
communes with bees
to create 'sweet' art

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VISUAL ART CRITIC

It's been a busy year for Penelope Stewart, which, given her subject and material of choice, begs for the awful, obvious pun that I'm not going to use here. For at least the past decade, Stewart has been studiously fascinated with the workings of bees (get it?) — everything from their social hierarchies and divisions of labour down to their perfectly modular structures (like honeycombs) and, perhaps most importantly, the byproduct of all this busywork, beeswax.

Stewart has been crafting sculptures with this infinitely pliable material for years but, since fall 2010, she's been a volume operation. In the past 18 months, the work has been commissioned for shows in museums in America (the prestigious Albright Knox, in Buffalo), France (la Musée Barthete) and the small-but-mighty Oakville Galleries, just down the QEW. This week, she brings home a small sampling of that labour at Edward Day Gallery. The compact exhibition, called "Haptic Exchanges," belies the exhaustive, immersive, often sweet-smelling nature of her principal works. It also marks the publication of a catalogue that presents these three projects with crisp photography and writing.

At the gallery, a trio of small grids offer a taste of Stewart's *Apian Screen* series, which most often takes the form of high-relief maps of cities, assembled, puzzle-like,



CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR

Penelope Stewart's *Apian Screen* at Harbourfront in 2009.

from 4-inch beeswax tiles. For those lucky enough to happen upon it two years ago, Stewart lined an entire room at Harbourfront Centre with the piece, which plied its particular modular logic of an urban plan for several feet in every direction.

It was one of my favourites that year, and it appears that the curators of *"Beyond/In New York,"* a Buffalo-based biennial exhibition centred around the Albright-Knox, agreed; they commissioned Stewart, who lives in Toronto, to expand the project to the museum's enormous central hall, a soaring neo-classical space with 6-metre ceilings. For the project, Stewart crafted 15,000 interlocking tiles, representing an idealized urban plan of spectacularly epic proportions.

Stewart, who has a palpable bottled energy that escapes in spurts as she talks about her work, just smiles congenially: "I like labour," she says. "A certain amount of repetition. That's really been in my work forever."

With this simple statement, there are so many connections to be

Busy work waxes poetic

made. Stewart's core metaphor, of the endless industry of a colony of bees, resonates with elegant clarity with her project. Stewart's cities are not actual but idealized, utopian renderings based on the notions of the high-Modernist priest Le Corbusier's vision of the Radiant City — a modular and scalable model of urban perfection, harmonized in its efficiency.

**Her practice isn't limited
to wax, nor is her virtuosity**

Modernism embraced the machine age as a liberating break from all things past but, within that, it also embodied a devotion to the primal: The modern form, in city-building, architecture, art and whatever else, was the channelling of a pure, unconscious essence, derived from the natural order of things. Stewart's work directly makes that link: her cities are crafted from the material produced by nature's unofficial urban planners, whose precise gifts for perfect, modular replication are hard-wired

into their DNA.

Stewart's works translate the Modernist ideal, of the same primal programming present in the human impulse to build, and makes a direct, literal translation.

Of course, utopia isn't always what it's cracked up to be and the modernist hives, most often seen in such oppressive structures as housing projects, were predicated on the same innate all-for-oneness found in the apiary.

What makes Stewart's work so strong (not to mention unique) is not only her particularized connection to the apian world, but her exceptional gift with material. These are gorgeous, tactile, visceral things, giving off a sweet, acrid scent that makes them fully immersive.

But her practice isn't limited to wax, nor is her virtuosity. On a pedestal in the gallery sits a deep black object that looks woven from thick, coarse wire (it's actually a sculpture, cast in black glass). Like the screens, it begs to be touched.

"The inside has the same integrity as the outside," says Stewart, helpfully tilting the object up for a

glance inside, where the same coarse weave twines into deepening shadow. She runs a hand across the grain of the coarse surface and smiles. "I love it."

The object is a bee skep, an archaic kind of manmade hive, and Stewart again makes the clear connection to the utopian. "I was working with the idea of Corbusier's primitive hut," she says — a reference to the rough, organic structures that he imagined mankind first crafted — and their harmonious, natural simplicity. The repetition of the weave coupled with the organic-seeming form certainly echoes these priorities, maybe revealing a closer symmetry with the universe of bees than her other work might suggest.

"I've realized over the last five years that my work has always been about the duality of hope and hopefulness: keep trying, keep looking for utopia," she hints, then laughs. "Just make sure you know it's not going to happen."

Penelope Stewart's "Haptic Exchanges" continues at the Edward Day Gallery, 956 Queen St. W., Suite 200 (inside MOCCA courtyard), to Feb. 18