

VISUAL ARTS

A bee's eye view of city-building

Artist Penelope Stewart turns modernist notion of urban planning on its honey-scented head

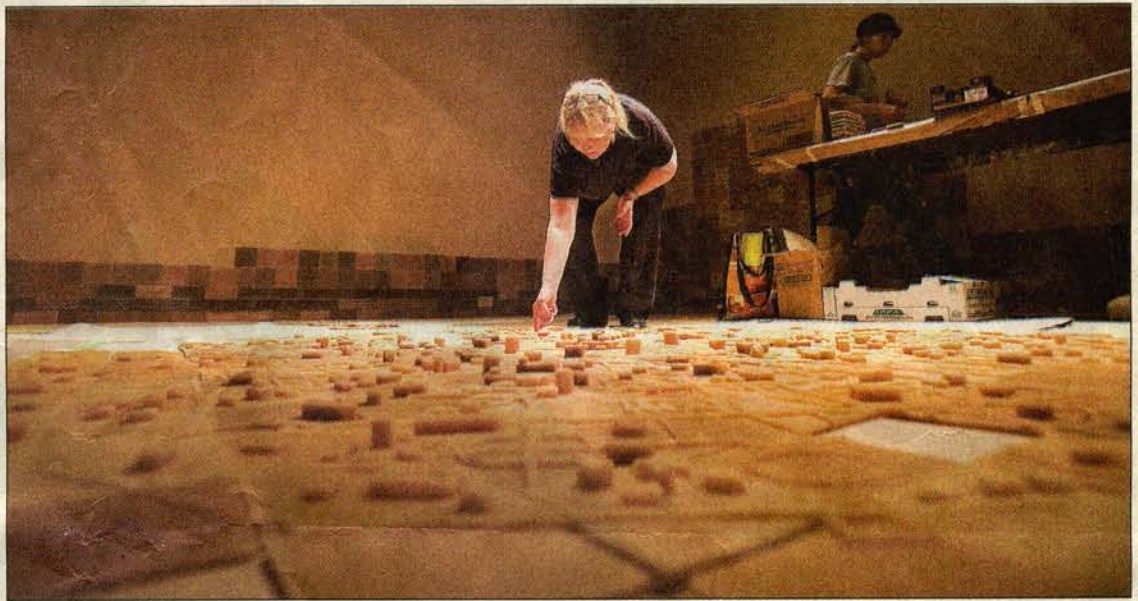
MURRAY WHYTE
VISUAL ART CRITIC

In a small room set off to the side of Harbourfront Centre's York Quay gallery, Penelope Stewart set about the painstaking work of piecing together her vision of urban utopia. A tall order in any case, but particularly so when that vision is boxed tidily in 4-inch-square pieces.

The faint scent of honey hung in the air as two installation workers pieced together the work earlier this week: Hundreds of 4-inch beeswax tiles in varying hues of golden brown, re-assembled like a puzzle. With more than half the pieces yet to be put in place, its form was clear: a model city, circular roadways radiating outward from a modest central cluster of buildings.

It's called *Apian Screen* — an apiary is the prefab hive used by beekeepers — and the metaphor is hard to miss. "I was really interested in futurist architects who looked at their apiaries and examined the social system of bees," said Stewart, her hands slightly gluey from the silicon adhesive she uses to affix her city to the wall. "They were really looking at it as a social model, a new way to think about our own cities."

For a modern thinker like the French architect Le Corbusier, the hive implies a simple, social democratic logic — the kind of thing he might have applied to his *Radiant City*, which called for the entire central part of Paris to be demolished and rebuilt with a new social order in mind: Housing parceled out by family size, say, not economic privilege.



CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR

Penelope Stewart at York Quay earlier this week assembling the beeswax tiles of her installation *Apian Screen*.

That's the thing about utopian thinking, though: Paradise for one is hell for another, and given that utopian visions are usually accompanied by strong-armed autocratic implementation, there's always a bit of a dent in whatever version of perfection that emerges.

Stewart's project takes that sense of blind idealism and turns it back on itself, extracting a literal meaning out of the metaphor that's both playful and absurd. It's also tactile; it might be the only installation in the city you're encouraged to touch, so feel free.

Meanwhile, in the main gallery, curator Patrick Mahon offers a cooler view of not the city, but rather its chilly other, and a blunt sense of us-and-them pervades.

It's called "Hinterland," which, in German, literally means "the land behind." Behind what, exactly, is left mostly to interpretation.

But mostly, for us, the hinterland

is the world Out There, flung, to varying degrees of far-ness, from our idea of the centre. In Mahon's show, the hinterland is about "being a physical and psychological distance" from that so-called centre, he says, and it finds form in the unnaturally silent suburbs painted by Sky Glabush and honest-to-God wilderness as experienced by Collette Urban, and in second-tier cities and the paranoid fantasies that isolation can shake loose in our urban-infected brains.

I'm thinking specifically of the Toronto collective Fastwurms, who some time ago decamped for a hinterland of their choosing, near Creemore, Ont. On one gallery wall, a collection of snapshots of their neighbours' cars and houses are pinned haphazardly together; called *Getaway Cars and Safe Houses*, the installation itself suggests an anxious unease, but a closer look suggests their paranoid isolation is

complete: A beige Ford LTD is accompanied with the hand-scrawled caption "Private Dick," a late '60s Buick gets labelled "Juice Monkey."

For Fastwurms, their hinterland leaves them exposed, vulnerable and highly suspicious, while for Diana Thorneycroft, the world out there is ripe for a little myth-busting. Thorneycroft, who works from her own hinterland of Winnipeg, is best known these days for her photographic recreations, using toy figurines, of Group of Seven classics.

You can see the work full-size at her show at the McMichael gallery in Kleinberg — the images here at Harbourfront are smaller reproductions — but if you'd rather experience such hinterlands from a safe distance, then York Quay is a handy alternative, right here in the centre of the universe.

Hinterlands and *Apian Screen* open Friday at York Quay Gallery, Harbourfront Centre.