

Bug bites, rich fresh mud and great art

When they say 'museum' in Muskoka, they actually mean 'big wet forest'



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BEV HOGG, TRISH ROAN, PENELOPE STEWART AND JEANNIE THIB AT THE TREE MUSEUM

Ongoing, 1634 Doe Lake Rd.,
Muskoka Rd. 6, near
Gravenhurst, Ont.;
www.thetreemuseum.ca

When friends invited me to Muskoka's Tree Museum, I prepared for the journey like the sensible cultural worker I am. I wore a light, sporty ensemble and sleek, paper-thin shoes. I brought candy for the road. I spritzed myself with a clever and intriguing cologne.

Four hours later – chilled, rain-dampened, my shoes filled with rich fresh mud and my perfumed neck pocked with bug bites – I understood that the word “museum” is culturally specific. Apparently, in Muskoka, “museum” means “a really big, wet forest.” A really big, wet forest full of great art.

To get to the Tree Museum, you leave the highway, careen down a winding stretch of rural road, and park your car in a lumpy old hayfield. Then you walk, walk, walk up a lonesome two-kilometre trail into an elevated woodland, a mulchy, pristine forest ornamented with pretty lakes and towering boulders.

As you get closer to the trail end, the Tree Museum unfolds all around you, and helpful signs point you along side paths where artists have installed weather-proof art. In operation for over a decade, the Tree Museum is home to an impressive selection of site-specific (that is to say, rock, tree and stream-specific) installations – and the 2010 collection, unveiled last weekend, maintains the high standard. There's nothing like

seeing art while under threat of a limb-snapping fall.

First up is Jeannie Thib's monumental painting of a cloud, erected on top of a massive, cube-shaped boulder. The 6-by-6-foot canvas (made of plywood covered in flattened strips of birchbark) is spare – Thib restricted her colour choice to a matte black house paint – but the combination of her curling brush strokes and the way striations of the birch bark gives her calligraphic image a fluctuating pulse, a gentle restlessness. Under full sun, with all the silvers in the bark gleaming, the painting vibrates, floats eastward.

Complementing the painting is a serving-platter-sized marble circle, nestled in the folds of a lichen covered rock. Representing the moon, the bright white sculpture is surrounded by dots and splotches of grey-green lichen, mossy clusters of stars. Depending on the time of day, Thib's painting/sculpture combo changes as the available light alters. This is a quiet work that rewards patient, still viewing.

Farther down the road, Penelope Stewart uses a small clearing in a humble little grove to make giant our conflicted relationship with nature. From a distance, Stewart appears to have commissioned the blowing of the world's largest glass cloche (the domes used by gardeners to protect seedlings, and as terrarium tops).

On closer inspection, however, the viewer sees that Stewart has neatly integrated a 12-foot-tall photograph of a tabletop cloche between the trees, creating a forest *trompe l'oeil*. The spectacle provokes wonder, an ahhh, and then causes you to think about how often we treat the natural world as something to be catalogued, named and subsequently harvested (or kept under glass), depending on our own needs.

Two visiting artists from Australia, Bev Hogg and Trish Roan, engage the forest as a theatrical spectacle – exactly



Penelope Stewart's giant forest *trompe l'oeil*.

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the way you'd expect people from another continent to react.

Bev Hogg's two installations, both made from foraged branches, act as frames for tiny, teeming pockets of the woods. One frame, modelled after the viewfinder of a camera, is positioned in front of a soft, sunken patch of bright, lemony green lichen. The goal is to get you to stop, align your vision and then to consider the landscape in front of you as you might a painting.

The second installation is a twisting, woven branch circle, big enough to walk through, placed in front of a small lake clogged with lily pads. Again, we are asked to mark the transition between spaces and terrains. Hogg is not necessarily asking the viewer to look more closely at the land-

scape, but, rather, to view these spaces with the same mindset one applies to recorded imagery – her twig frames are pause buttons in the blur of greenery.

Trish Roan's work is quieter, and spookier, but also takes a cinematic approach. Using a flat interior wall on the side of a rock as a screen, Roan places several mirrors on the adjacent trees and aims them at the sky. At noon, the sun hits the mirrors and gradually, over half an hour, causes a hostly, white sphere to appear on the dark rock face.

Referencing solar temples, camera obscura boxes, and pagan celestial calendars (Stonehenge comes to mind, of course), Roan plays metaphysical games with bare stone, cloud cover and simple sunlight.

Only a foreigner could see Plato's cave waiting in the rough Canadian Shield.