

THE BEE'S KNEES

SURE, SNIFF AT STEWART'S SENSORY ART BY FRAN SCHECHTER

➔ **PENELOPE STEWART** at Koffler Gallery (Artscape Youngplace, 180 Shaw), to August 31. 647-925-0643.

NOW RATING: NNNN art@nowtoronto.com • NOW | July 6-13, 2014 | VOL 33 NO 45



Penelope Stewart's fine Vanitas looks at our fragile symbiosis with bees. The fragrant aura of Vanitas, the latest in a series of beeswax installations by Penelope Stewart, hits you as soon as you enter Koffler Gallery.

It's a homecoming for the Toronto-based artist, who's mounted related projects, which she calls "sensory architecture," internationally. Reusing cast-wax elements from previous installations where they've sometimes been inserted into existing architecture, she here erects a human-sized "hive" within the gallery space.

A shelf of beeswax skeps, the pointed-dome basketry beehives whose form has become a symbol of apiculture, provides an intro to the exhibit. From these human-created homes for bees, we move on to an enclosed rectangular room inspired by the modernism of Le Corbusier, who was also fascinated by bees.

Its outside is covered with plain wax tiles, but inside the room is plastered with an exuberant array of three-dimensional natural and decorative arts elements, all cast in wax: floral-patterned tiles, flowers and seedpods, candlesticks and doorknobs. Spilling out of the room's window side is a domestic hoarder's beeswax treasure trove: piles of pitchers, plates, spoons, buttons, keys, hand-mirrors, ornate frames. "Vines," wax leaves and eggshell-like forms strung on cords that hang from the ceiling, emerge from the structure to colonize the exterior space.

The term "vanitas" was historically used to describe still lifes that contain symbols of mortality and the transience of the material world. Underlying the chaotic jumble of decorative elements is an awareness that our pesticides are endangering pollinating insects, with devastating consequences for agriculture. The wax's varied shades of gold, derived from the colour of pollen, remind us how precious and fragile is our symbiosis with the bees. We're left to contemplate the interdependent circle of nature and culture, and the source of our aesthetic concepts of beauty. Stewart's tapped into something deeply ingrained, because as I write this, I'm flooded with a vivid sense memory of the sweet smell of beeswax.