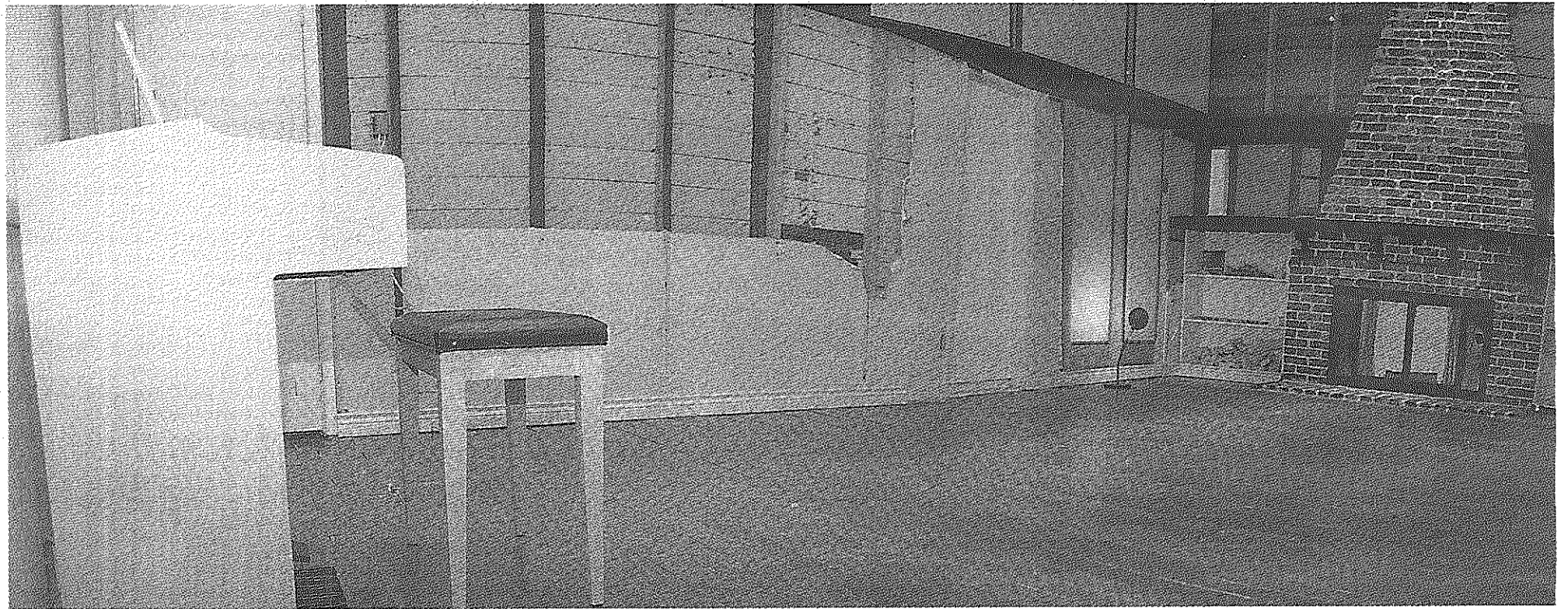


Arts & Entertainment

Michael Di Leo, Editor | arts@mediumonline.ca

Beauty in the breakdown

The Blackwood Gallery's newest exhibition brings UTM inside



Matthew Filipowich/The Medium

Panorama of the interior of the Thomas Cottage.

NIVES HAJDIN
ASSISTANT A&E EDITOR

The construction of art is a multi-layered process. An initial stroke of inspiration, some preliminary drawings, an assemblage of materials and a whole lotta coffee come together as the key ingredients of many artistic endeavours, including the Blackwood Gallery's latest exhibition, *Location! Location! Location!*, which opened last Wednesday.

A project that required the construction of art, artists Christine Swintak and Don Miller undertook the ambitious task of disassembling Thomas Cottage piece by piece, carrying the parts across the campus via a shopping cart and rebuilding it by hand within the confines of the gallery walls. Originally a residence for the Erindale College's live-in artists, the 19th century cottage is meeting its 21st century demise and will be demolished in a few months time to make room for the expanding construction of new campus buildings. Hoping to prolong the cottage's lifespan for any amount of time and by any means necessary, the artists (along with the help of the gallery's work-study students) have been painting, nailing and building the impressive framework for the past month, in addition to uncovering fascinating artefacts within the cottage, such as 1930s newspapers beneath the floorboards.

"We just cut the floor out and then removed it, so it's kind of like opening up a can, and then [there was] the untouched ground underneath the floor. A

time capsule!" Swintak explains.

The artists have gotten to know the cottage quite intimately, since it functioned as their own live-in residence for the duration of the project. Often times Miller and Swintak found themselves without water or electricity in the cold winter nights.

"The day that we ripped [the central light] out, all the power in the cottage went out, and it was like -15°C." Swintak recalls. "So it was like this weird thing, where we took the heart out and it died, but then as we added more stuff in there, the power went back on, so we sort of resuscitated it."

In line with the cottage's "resuscitation" and its struggle to survive an impending death, Miller and Swintak came up with the concept of "Good Cop, Bad Cop, No Cop," a three-part rant that simultaneously worships, jettisons and observes the cottage's existence.

"We first came up with the rant because the building was gonna be torn down, and we came up with the idea to sort of talk about the cottage as it was being torn down, and we thought we better have megaphones 'cause it's gonna be quite loud, so we were sort of 'pro the cottage' and 'against the cottage,'" Miller admits.

So who's the bad cop between the two of them?

"The first rant was when I first came in here. I was like, 'What am I gonna do with this place?' and then I just started talking out loud by myself to it, and I didn't really have a lot of nice stuff to say," Swintak laughs. "So I was standing in here by myself going, 'YOUR CURTAINS ARE UGLY! YOUR WOOD SUCKS!' So I just

let it out, and then Don came on board and he sort of did the opposite."

Yet Swintak's supposed distaste for the cottage won't stop her from carrying on its legacy into the future. When asked what will become of the reconstructed cottage once the exhibition is over, she speaks of it almost affectionately.

"So I was standing in here by myself going, 'YOUR CURTAINS ARE UGLY! YOUR WOOD SUCKS!' So I just let it out, and then Don came on board and he sort of did the opposite."

"We're going to take it to Don's place and rebuild it again and we also talked about rebuild[ing] it in trees, so that you could climb up into it. So it'll be funny in that location because the green lumber is gonna have this whole other [effect], and sure enough if we bring it there, it'll probably be different again, so it's this sort of like mobile, morphing, extremely labour intensive thing." One of the pseudo-cottage's most alluring features is the radiant green lumber that has been juxtaposed with the old, brown cottaged wood, in order to differentiate the original cottage elements with those that couldn't be transferred to the new structure.

As the primary site of *Location! Location! Location!*, the Blackwood Gallery has experienced a radical transformation of scenery, and upon entering the

space, the viewer is immediately met with the first piece of the original cottage setting. A large tree-like bush that has been uprooted from the cottage property sits beside the gallery door, with dead leaves, dirt clods and pebbles all lining the concrete floor. Rather than simply buying a plastic decoration, the bush is literally pulled from the ground and replanted on the gallery floor in order to uphold the authenticity of the site. The floor then transforms into an inlay of stone slabs pieced together by the luminous green sealant, a porch on which the cottage bench beckons the visitor to have a seat and take in their surroundings. In fact, the reconstruction encompasses the entire gallery space, and elements such as the drain pipe, porch light and extending window panels greatly contribute to the illusion of an exterior space.

An interesting auditory inclusion to the space is the ongoing metronome of a piano that rests against the back wall of the cottage structure. The metronome encourages the viewer to enter the interior area to play the piano.

The only sources of light inside the space are the lamps illuminating portions of the walls, as well as the slits of gallery light seeping through the open ceiling panels. On the opposite wall is yet another impressive reconstruction: the original cottage fireplace, which has been rebuilt brick by brick, and cemented together using the same green mortar in order to suggest a combination of old and new. Yet the new cottage is predominantly a reunion of old materials, including scratched floorboards, bent

lightshades, graffiti-covered window panels, and half-missing and hole-induced walls. The shelves are lined with original cottage items such as drinking glasses and pieces of wood, which are again contrasted with their green-coloured doppelgangers. Outside the realm of the reconstructed cottage is a gallery wall that is plastered with pages of the artists' working ideas, rough concepts and sketches throughout the entire reconstruction that draw from their good cop/bad cop theme.

The second *Location!* is the e|Gallery, in which the excavated newspapers have been put on display for the public to peruse (be sure to put on your green safety gloves!) and are truly one of the exhibition's must-see features. Both the third and final site as well as the inspiration for the entire undertaking, Thomas Cottage offers visitors the rare chance to experience one of UTM's oldest and most renowned structures before it is effaced forever.

As for Swintak and Miller, the project has been a challenging yet extremely worthwhile salvation, even if only a temporary one.

"A renovation is like a renewal and we were part of that process." *Location! Location! Location!* will remain open to the public until March 1, with new gallery hours: Monday-Friday from 12 p.m. to 5 p.m.; Wednesdays until 9 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday from 12 p.m. to 3 p.m. Contact the Blackwood Gallery at 905-828-3789 for more information.

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