



A. Clive Cohen

Rotting leaves create a quirky dichotomy

by Mara Giordan

Moving Towards . . .
Winter's College Art Gallery

"Moving Towards . . ." an installation/improvisation exhibit, was more than an eye-full, it was also an ear-full, a hand-full and yes, a nose-full too.

Two weeks ago saw the Winter's College Gallery's first showing of the 1990-91 academic year. Presented and prepared by three of York's visual arts students, Angela Somerset, Stephen Doyle and Andrew Brouse.

As I threaded my way through the hallways of Winter's College and neared the gallery, a pungent odour filled my nostrils. It smelled like leaves - a familiar smell at this time of the year.

My sense of smell did not betray me, for when I entered the gallery I was greeted by mounds of dark and rotting leaves resembling buried human forms.

Throughout the mounds pathways had been formed, spontaneously created by previous guests of the exhibit. Jutting out from the mounds were stark, white wooden pickets adorned with red painted crosses.

My perception of the scene took on a new light as my gaze shifted to the front of the room. There, a row of tiny, white, artificially illuminated sugar-cubed houses, each resting on its own perfectly manicured synthetic lawn, was being supported on long, wiry,

stilt structures.

Above the chatter of the guests a synthesized song of the housewren was being emitted from a stark white box at the entrance to the gallery.

The scene necessitated a total involvement and liberation of the senses.

According to Angela Somerset, the show purports to "explore the dialogue/collision between the poles of the nature/culture dichotomy with an eye to some of the quirky absurdities of contemporary life."

The collision was head-on. The decaying leaves provided a reeling contrast to the white sugar houses.

If I initially felt more comfortable looking at the serene and sophisticated sugar houses than the rotting leaves, that comfort was short-lived.

A closer look at the houses showed them to be precariously balanced on their wire structures. In fact, one of them looked like it could fall at the slightest touch.

Stephen Doyle suggests one possible interpretation of the piece as "a movement towards decay" with "erosion in both houses and nature."

Andrew Brouse describes the show as a "surrealist juxtaposition of incongruent elements." He describes the piece as "experiential."

This may allow one to feel and interpret the scene in different ways depending upon what their past experiences dictate. In fact, on an impulse I wanted to kick the

leaves into the air, or throw myself carelessly into a pile of them - an act reminiscent of my younger years as a child. Perhaps for this reason Stephen claims a certain "open-endedness" to the interpretation of the show.

Where the houses and the synthesized lawns remain the same for years, the leaves, on the other hand, will constantly undergo a process of regeneration. Could this be what the red, painted crosses symbolize? Symbolic of healing, the red crosses provide affirmation for the continuance and endurance of nature.

In terms of structure, the exhibit denies having one at all.

It is a packaging and simulation of nature - a sophisticated composition of natural and created objects blending to form a myriad of images.

It is a refreshing change to be able to actively participate in an exhibit, and although the piece gives little in the way of instant gratification, it is most definitely a thoroughly imaginative and thought provoking piece.

Pam Jacobs, curator of the Winter's College Gallery, promises more exciting exhibits in the months ahead. Yes, somewhere behind the unassuming walls of Winter's College there lies a gallery brimming with new and innovative exhibits.

Next on the agenda is a video installation by Beth Francis which begins on Nov. 19 and runs through until Nov. 23. The gallery is open from Mon. to Fri., 12-3pm. See you there!

Art for people's sake

by Daniel Judd

A Fine and Public Place
Wendy Michener Symposium

While leaving the Fine Arts building the other day, I happened to stumble onto a conversation between two of York's maintenance staff. "It looks like garbage to me," one caretaker said to the other.

They were criticizing a colourful banner that squeezed out the back door of the I.D.A. Gallery, suspended from the ceiling of the adjoining walkway.

In defense of this show, I quickly responded. "Hey c' mon man, this is art." The larger of the two was quick to respond. "I've seen better art on my refrigerator."

This battle between "intention" and "interpretation" took on a more serious tone the following day, during the "4th Annual Wendy Michener Symposium" held at the Nat Taylor Cinema.

Renowned writer, broadcaster and cultural commentator Bronwyn Drainie provided the insightful and provocative keynote address during the afternoon. The event was hosted by the Faculty of Fine Arts and Winter's College.

The subject of Drainie's address entitled "A Fine and Public Place," was the conflicts that arise when cultural institutions try to meet the interests and concerns of their public.

The recent exhibit "Into the Heart of Africa" held during the summer at the Royal Ontario Museum, was among the examples used to illustrate this tension. The exhibit's stated purpose of drawing attention to the irony of white colonialism in deepest Africa at the turn of the century, was seen as patronizing and racist by the Afro-Canadian community. They feel that the artifacts displayed, told an entirely different story.

Drainie suggested that in the past, it has been the "hierarchical" structure of cultural institutions such as the ROM and the Canada Council that has caused such dilemmas. The predominance of white English and French Canadians within this structure has over-

looked a number of minority factions, including native Canadians.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, one finds institutions such as the National Museum and the CBC, telling the public what they want to hear by providing them with regional coverage. A move, according to Drainie, aimed at "duping Canadians" into thinking that they are being widely and fairly represented.

Drainie spent a number of years as a broadcaster for the CBC, during which time she witnessed this kind of false representation. News broadcasts for the different regions across the country were prepared, each with consistent national coverage, but varying regional news.

"A fisherman in Newfoundland would assume that the whole country was learning about his problems" she said. While, in fact, only those who were directly affected by the issues were hearing about them on "The World at Six."

In general, she stated, it is the white male hegemony that has failed to recognize the change in public demands. Because of the diverse and widespread fragmentation we experience in our country, and the lack of any effective means of "marketing" our interests, institutions go about their ways somewhat blindly.

Drainie also spoke about self-censorship: the fear of expression which leads to presentations that are toned down so as not to offend certain groups. She feels that this type of compromise will ultimately create meaningless vacuum.

Her solution to this dilemma is one of integration and representation. "Every group should have access to the challenge of communications," Drainie said. "Fairness, truth and honesty is the only job facing our cultural institutions today."

Following Drainie's address, a number of noted personalities were given the opportunity to comment, including Barbara Emo of the NFB, Yvon DesRochers, the director general of the National Arts Centre and John McNeill, the acting Director of the ROM.



Bronwyn Drainie