Espace Sculpture

Shore/lines
Responding to Place
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Shore/lines: responding to place

The concept of ArtCity — a city that is encompassed by and devoted to art in a multiplicity of voices, expressions, and forms — is the vision of the MacLaren Art Centre’s Director, William Moore. A city with a population of 120 thousand, one hour north of Toronto, and perceived as the gateway to the north, Barrie, Ontario, is the optimal location for this transformation.

The first major initiative under the umbrella of ArtCity is the environmental art biennial Shore/lines. From May to October 2003, the first edition of Shore/lines (plans are already underway for 2005) not only offers its participants the opportunity to explore the nature theme and its relation to culture and humankind, but also references Barrie’s own historical development as part of the city’s sesquicentennial celebrations.

Barrie embraces one end of Lake Simcoe, known as Kempenfelt Bay, and sits on what was the shore of the ancient Lake Algonquin. Kempenfelt Bay is the starting point of the historic Nine Mile Portage, used long before colonization by the First Nations to reach Georgian Bay, and the Bay also played an important role in the Fur Trade and the war of 1812. On the basis of such a rich history, Shore/lines proposes to examine the real and imagined boundaries between land and water as well as their relations to each other. Following the advice of Montreal-based independent curator and writer John K. Grande, the MacLaren invited sixteen artists from across Canada, the United States, and Europe — six of them working in teams of two — to choose a site within Barrie and create a response to the social and geographical terrain. This summer, fourteen such sites offer an equal number of responses. Some reference the impact of humankind on the environment, while others recreate the lighthouses that have guided boats for centuries on waterways around the world. Erected on Georgian College’s property, his installation references these buildings with its tall and slender column covered with the required warning stripes. It has no light, however; instead, it is topped with three radar-like dishes covered with straw. Gill’s work combines his personal experience of the rugged Atlantic coastline (in Halifax and St. John’s) and Barrie’s topographical and agricultural history. Such lighthouses are still found in the region of Simcoe County bordering Georgian Bay, the earliest of which was built in 1831 on Simcoe Island at Nine Mile Point. In his work, Will Gill strives not only to question, but also to find a healthy balance between progress and nature — if such equilibrium exists at all. To create the wooden lighthouse Gill used dead pine trees removed from the local parkland in Barrie. The final trimming was done with various electric hand tools — a chainsaw, a sander, and a grinder —, leaving marks on the main body, the scars of industrialization on nature. Inspired in part by an oak tree twice as old as Barrie itself, the artist created a protection device usually situated on the physical boundaries of water and land. Traditionally a lighthouse’s purpose is to warn of nature’s destructive force — to protect people from danger; Gill’s lighthouse is intended to do the opposite. His creation can be perceived as a warning sign to protect the old trees, a natural heritage, against industrialization, as well as suggesting a historical link connecting Simcoe County’s past, its present, and its future.

Although incorporating a more spiritual approach, similar links are found in the work of Alfio Bonanno. Founder of Tickon (Tranekaer...

Our general perception and recording of history is often linear, following a chronological order. Barrie artist Derek Martin, also working on Georgian College property, explores this linear notion and raises our awareness of the uneven progression and "development" of an urban environment, through a 150 foot walkway — one for every year of Barrie's evolution. Delineated by tall maple saplings, creating expanding and contracting spaces, the poles suggest both boom times as well as more difficult ones. In the context of the biennial, this wave-like symmetrical construction references a shoreline, where water reflects land and flows in, out, and in between without restraint, similar to the way history is "represented", lost and repeated. Hence Martin's work, Reconstructing Provenance, speaks to the fact that the linear construction of events in sequence is inherently disruptive and emphasizes the diversity of community by referencing various voices including that of nature itself. For ages, even long before industrialization, societies have left traces of their existence on the landscape. Inspired by the ancient Greek belief and ensuing ceremonies revolving around the Centre of the world — the omphalos —, long thought to be in the city of Delphi, as well as by "the all too frequent human frailty to take ourselves too seriously... pour le nombril du monde," Quebec artist Bill Vazan created Barrie's belly button. The artist cut and removed the grass turf in Sunnidale Park to reveal a long umbilical cord-like design. The city's belly button — its life source — relates to his series of stone engravings. Vazan's earth-work is part of an on-going worldwide series. Here, metaphorically, he refers to the heart of the city, which was historically by the water, the source of life. The large organic structures are placed on the slope of the beach, across the shoreline and down into the lake, the weight of the rocks keeping them in place. Their disposition emphasizes the meeting point of water and land and creates a dialogue with the immediate surroundings. At dusk on the final day of completion of Bonanno's work, fires emanated from the openings of the large pods for a brief moment in a ritualistic manner — traces of this ritual still remain on the rocks and charred saplings, symbols of the passage of time and of history itself.

The Shore/lines exhibition offers differing responses to the theme of water/land boundaries, as it does, in social and historical terms, to the Barrie community. Additional installations include a boat filled with metaphorical meanings, by French artists Gilles Bruni and Marc Babarit, while First Nations artist Glenna Matoush, in collaboration with Jan Larson, constructed the Beaver Tree, or Amistikuk in Cree, to pay tribute to an animal that once was source of food, clothing, and trade. Other participants in Shore/lines are Canadian artists Iain Baxter, Lance Belanger, Kitty Mykka, Mike MacDonald, and American artists Betty Beaumont, Patrick Dougherty and Alan Sonfist. This first edition of the MacLaren's environmental art biennial is about a community — its geography, its history, its social fabric — through which these nature-based art installations will force us to reconsider our own relationship and response to the environment and our sense of place.

Shore/lines Biennial
Barrie, Ontario
May to October 2003

Notes:
1. Mary Reid, "Roughing it in the Bush", ArtCity, May/April/May 2003, vol. 6, issue 1, p. 8.