

VISUAL ARTS

Nature becomes the canvas

By ANN ROSENBERG

Have you ever thought of making art out of huckleberries or wildflowers? Or imagined making a sculpture for deer to feed on?

That's what Rick Gibson has been up to lately in a project that's using a forest as a canvas.

Gibson (yes, the same Rick Gibson who hit the headlines some years ago with his controversial plan to squish Sniffy the Rat on canvas with a concrete brick) is one of a group of Vancouver artists currently leaving their marks in the University of B.C.'s Malcolm Knapp research forest in Maple Ridge.

Gibson, who came up with the scheme, believes this forest — which already attracts more than 5,500 hikers a year — could become even more attractive to visitors if it became a sculpture forest like England's Grizedale. The village of Grizedale is host to 150,000 tourists annually, people who come from around the world to experience art in a research forest.

Maple Ridge, says Gibson, could become a similar focus for visitors who wish to combine outdoor recreation with scientific learning and esthetic pleasure.

Funding for the project — which currently involves Gibson, Lycia Trouton and Kempton Dexter — comes from the province's ministries of tourism and social services.

If you want to see what's being made, take a walk through the forest. The artists are at work most weekdays (the project ends

with a gallery-style opening in late October) and they'll be able to talk to you in depth about what they are doing.

But you'll need a sharp eye to find the sculpture — it's all made from debris the artists find in the forest or from materials that fit in

with the environment.

One of the loveliest pieces created so far is Trouton's Web Armature, a giant cobweb-like net suspended between the trees.

Dexter's sculpture of a hand holding a cup is carved into a log that had fallen in the forest.

Gibson has transformed a rectangle of trees at the edge of this forest into a sanctuary where you can eat lunch or simply enjoy the vista that unfolds beyond. The low fence at the bottom of sculpture is made from twigs and more

substantial pieces of wood artist scavenged.

Gibson and his colleagues doing environmentally friendly art here, art that's adding an extra dimension to outdoor recreation. ♦



OF THE LAND:
A Tree Field by
Rick Gibson
(above); Web
Armature by Lycia
Trouton (far right);
and Cornelia
Schleime's
elephant in Drift
on the Norwegian
coastline



Meanwhile, far across the seas, B.C. artist Gary Pearson is involved in another major environmental project. He's one of 10 artists invited to create sculptures in, or near, the grounds of Lista Lighthouse Gallery in Norway.

As curator Tor Gamman explained it, under Lista's high skies and under the influence of the constant wind, it's easy to feel like one of the figures in a Romantic landscape by Caspar David Friedrich. So he decided it was time to let art touch the landscape surrounding his gallery.

Several of the Norwegian and international artists who were part of Drift made sculpture for the land and shore near the gallery.

Norway's Solfrid Mortensen erected 313 white wind-socks in the fields adjoining Lista that are blown into ever-changing graphic patterns.

Germany's Cornelia Schleime created an exotic animal for the Norwegian coastline. Her image of a mammoth elephant was created from pebbles covered with aluminum foil. (She wasn't allowed to paint the stones because of environmental concerns.)

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Many responded to the presence of manufactured structures.

Dutch artist Vulto (he uses just one name) used six bunkers left over from Lista's Second World War defences as the basis for his sculpture. He wrapped each bunker with cloth and weighed the fabric down with sandbags. The shrouds were smoked by sawdust fires he let smoulder inside the derelict shelters for several days. By these processes, he said, he hoped to preserve the ruins and purify them by turning them into art.

Pearson's dialogue with Lista depended on his knowledge of Norwegian art and a sense of human nature that transcends international borders. His Farsund Community Equipment Depot is a witty gesture inspired by Norwegian artist Edvard Munch's famous Scream image. It's a fence-like piece that looks like a storage locker, with 28 megaphones and 28 rucksacks hanging on the

sculpture's vertical slats. Here, it is implied, to collect megaphones for shouting into the wind or silently as they wish — and can burden the with satchels of rocks if life's travails are not onerous.

What struck me about Drift was not the type it contains — many local public galleries exhibit installation work — but the fact that an outdoor publicly accessible site was used for the display of scale artworks of a temporary nature.

It showcases the kind of temporary outdoor installation we still see only occasionally here, in a place where many who produce this kind of work, like Gibson, are likely to get their best chances to do it where.

And it made me imagine the exciting things to be done by artists here in Stanley or Lighthouse or on the parkland of Point Grey.

It's obvious that the sculptures at Lista are what Rick Gibson and his colleagues are creating: works responsive to the environment that surrounds them.

Curator Gammon believes Drift is bringing it from New York to provincial Norway.

Gibson and his team are transforming the forest at Maple Ridge in a similar fashion. ♦

— Ann