

WIDGERY'S WONDROUS WIDGETS

NEW-OLD ART / At the invitation of Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum, a Montreal artist takes the institution's sober objects of study and gives them a surreal new spin.

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by Gillian Mackay

Toronto -- A MANE of blond hair cascades like water from a handmade copper sieve. A fistful of cigars protrudes from a Second World War gas mask. Butterflies cluster in jewel-like profusion around a silver flute.

It is as if the ghost of Salvador Dali or Meret Oppenheim had floated through the Royal Ontario Museum in the night and mixed everything up: bugs with bullets, seashells with kitchen ware, ladies' hats with porcupine quills.

In fact, the latter-day Surrealist at work here, Montreal sculptor Catherine Widgery, has been operating with the full co-operation of museum staff. Yet her installation *Lost Sense*, which opens today, mixes and matches the ROM's vast holdings in ways the founders never dreamed of.

"Sometimes I fear we have lost our sense of wonder about the world," said Widgery, a charming, articulate 45-year-old, whose chestnut hair, long legs and immense physical vitality give her somewhat the air of a thoroughbred horse. "The question for me at the museum was, how do we get that back?"

Raised in the countryside outside Pittsburgh, Widgery grew up exploring nature firsthand, with no glass cases or labels to get in the way. And dual exposure to rural farmland and to Pittsburgh's then-mighty steel mills helped to forge a lifelong fascination with the meeting of industrial and natural worlds.

A prize-winning graduate of Yale University's fine art program, Widgery moved to Montreal in 1979 to marry the poet Michael Harris (they have since divorced). For several years, she put sculpture on hold while she had three sons, managed an industrial building and ran a thriving catering business. But in 1984, the year her twins were born, she decided to focus entirely on making art, through which she has since supported her family. As of 1988, she has managed this through a string of public commissions, giving Widgery seniority in a field to which ever more artists are now looking in order to reach a wider audience and put bread on the table. (Recent high-profile projects include a grove of four bronze trees for Dan Hanganu's *École des Hautes Études Commerciales* in Montreal and a reflecting pool for Moshe Safdie's Ottawa City Hall.)

Howard Collinson, ROM curator and head of the museum's Institute of Contemporary Culture, said that Widgery's professional ease with large-scale projects and her "sense of public accountability" led him to commission an exhibition from her in 1995, to be based on the museum's collection. He was also prompted by his admiration for Widgery's

contribution to the ROM's *Survivors in Search of a Voice*, an art exhibition about breast cancer in which many of Canada's senior women artists participated. Her contribution to that show -- 24 hand-blown, breast-shaped glass flasks, filled with natural objects and clamped to a clinical metal rod in a poetic conjoining of the organic and man-made -- paved the way for *Lost Sense* .

At best, Widgery's 35 "hybrid sculptures" celebrate the often overlooked beauty and strangeness of the world around us. As critic **John Kissick** writes in his catalogue essay for the show, they slide "in and out of critical and institutional categories as they simultaneously attempt to re-animate our museum experience."

Awed as she was by the ROM's collection -- she had extensive access to the back rooms -- Widgery was also troubled by it. "All those thousands of little stuffed birds," she recalled. "It was as if, in pursuit of knowledge, we had lost respect for them as miracles of nature."

An undercurrent of unease, even violence, can be felt in many of Widgery's juxtapositions: a small bird has a metal whistle in place of its head; a long, white leather glove sprouts red dogwood branches like nerve ganglions; a 19th-century dressmaker's form is clothed in beech and ginkgo leaves held together by silver pins.

During the three years that Widgery worked on the show, she came to recognize in herself the lust that drives many serious collectors. Because many of the museum's artifacts were too fragile to be tampered with, she scoured antique and junk shops for replicas, eventually acquiring more than 200 objects. One day last summer she found herself with a butterfly net charging through a ditch full of brambles, hell-bent on snagging another specimen for her flute piece.

"I felt overwhelmed by the urge to possess that living creature," she said. "I know that it can all be justified in the name of art or science, but there is a dark side that we need to look at."

Behind the scenes, a few curators have taken offence. Yet Collinson commented good-humoredly, "It is interesting that Catherine feels she is putting the poetry back into the objects. We thought it was always there!"

Widgery, in Toronto for the past two weeks to supervise her mammoth ROM installation, is also casting her mind forward to this summer, when she will create her first major public project in the city.

Called *Liquid Echo* , Widgery's "sculptural environment" will link the sidewalk and the entrance to Penrose Condominiums, now under construction on Bay Street south of College. Unfazed by the brute ugliness of the downtown site, she aims to bring beauty and tranquillity into the heart of condoland, with a screen of columns that revolve in the wind to suggest falling water, huge rocks carved to create informal seating and two groves of ginkgo trees for contemplation.

The project's art consultant Catherine Williams said: "Catherine is not well known in Ontario, but she has won many competitions in Quebec and elsewhere. Public art is very tough to pull off."

Such are the exigencies of public projects that Widgery has been grateful for the opportunity the ROM commission has provided to refresh her inner sources of inspiration. A second exhibition of assemblages, "edgier and tougher" than those at the ROM, also opens today at Toronto's Leo Kamen Gallery. "The work at Leo's deals with sexual and physical taboos that would not have been appropriate for the ROM," she said.

In the future, Widgery hopes to maintain a fruitful balance between her public and private art making. Her Montreal studio is full of artifacts that were bought for *Lost Sense*, but never used. "I'll never be able to build them all," she said with a sigh. "But I'm in love with them just the same."

Catherine Widgery's Lost Sense runs until Sept. 20 at the Royal Ontario Museum, 100 Queen's Park, Toronto. Call 416-586-5549.

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