

GLOBE & MAIL Arts

Bob and Doung meet Tom and Lauren

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So," said the man with a smile to the dark-haired visitor, "it's taken a Westerner to come out and blow up our precious Eastern icons."

He was addressing Diana Thorneycroft, who is well and truly western Canadian – born in Claresholm, about 130 km south of Calgary, a BFA graduate from the University of Manitoba, a Winnipeg resident for much of her 53 years.

And while "blow up" wouldn't be her terminology for what she does – try "deconstruct" or "destabilize" – she didn't disavow his implication. "I said, 'Yeah'" she recalled the morning after the encounter (which, she stressed, was entirely good-natured), her big, infectious laugh filling a Toronto Starbucks where we'd agreed to meet.

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Prompting the exchange was their attendance at the recent opening of Canada, Myth and History: Group of Seven Awkward Moments, an exhibition of 21 thematic colour photographs by Thorneycroft that's having its world premiere through Nov. 29 at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection.

Located on 10 wooded acres in Kleinburg, north of Toronto, the McMichael may not have the largest or even the finest collection of paintings by the Group of Seven, Tom Thomson, Emily Carr and others of their ilk. But perhaps more than any other Canadian institution, it has treated its paintings of babbling brooks and whispering pines with a reverence bordering on the sacred. Indeed, thanks in no small part to the ministrations of the McMichael, our image of the Group of Seven is of this fuzzy aggregate of sainted, asexual guys, forever in plaid, toques and canoes, selflessly painting leaves for the spiritual nourishment of the nation. Adding to the sepulchral atmosphere of the locale are the shack in which Tom Thomson lived and painted before his untimely death in 1917, and a grove with the graves of Group of Seven members such as Lawren Harris and A.Y. Jackson as well as those of the couple who gave the site its name, Robert and Signe McMichael.

It's a pantheistic Valhalla, in short – and the last place one would imagine finding a series of diorama-like photographs using Group of Seven paintings, among others, as backdrops for all

sorts of satirical mischief, mayhem and general naughtiness. Yet this is precisely what Diana Thorneycroft and McMichael curator Sharona Adamowicz-Clements have done, to delightful effect. (Heightening the pleasure is Adamowicz-Clement's decision to hang five or six of the original paintings – some of them non-McMichael pieces – that Thorneycroft scanned for her tableau assemblages.)

Thorneycroft has been in this territory before. That is, Awkward Moments deploys the same sorts of figurines, dolls and props, manufactured and self-made, against idyllic backgrounds she used earlier in the decade with her blackly, sometimes bleakly humorous Canadiana Martyrdom series. Martyrdom of the Great One, for instance, featured a screaming Wayne Gretzky, chained in his Edmonton Oilers uniform to a tree overlooking Alberta's Maligne Lake, as lions and cougars circle for the kill and Hitchcockian Canada Geese perch like vultures.

But here her touch now is lighter – the result, she said, of "just being really happy these days," of "having so much fun in the studio" and of "coming to really [yes] respect" the achievements of many of the Group of Seven and especially Tom Thomson. "He was one helluva painter."

"I'm not dissing the Group of Seven," she insisted, eyes flashing behind dark horn-rimmed frames. "I'm just having a different kind of conversation than what we're used to. And the McMichael, I think, is the perfect place for that. I like to shake things up a little, so I just thought this would be good for them, even if they don't know it."

The show includes Thorneycroft's first Awkward Moment photograph, which she did as a one-off joke contribution to a 2005 fundraiser – its theme was "Group of Seven with a Twist" – for Winnipeg's Plug-In Gallery. Called Early Snow with Bob and Doug, it has the two McKenzie brothers doing what they do best (drinking beer). But instead of being in a studio, the clueless hosers are outdoors, in a snow-bound wilderness – the backdrop is, in fact, a scan of the 1916 Tom Thomson canvas Early Snow – while several wolves prowl menacingly around the boys' barbecue.

"The response to that one piece was amazing," she recalled, and it got her thinking about doing more. (In fact, the title for her original conception was Group of Seven [or More] Landscapes.) But art-making costs money, and Thorneycroft needed a patron. In 2006 she wrote a letter to Tom Smart, the newly appointed executive-director of the McMichael whom Thorneycroft had met in the mid-1990s when he was chief curator/acting director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Thorneycroft was gunning for a big grant – \$80,000 – from the Canada Council for the Arts. To help get it, she wanted Smart ("He knew my sense of humour") to commit to a show of her dioramas. Smart demurred, saying, "Let's see the work first." But he agreed to write a letter to the Council supporting Thorneycroft's proposal.

By the spring of 2007, Thorneycroft had her money, a leave of absence from her job at the University of Manitoba as a sessional art instructor and two years in which to realize her "strategy." In the beginning at least, that strategy was to "subvert" the Group of Seven "as a female artist living outside the centre," the centre in this case being Ontario generally and Toronto in particular.

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Contrary to many Easterners' belief, the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson are not universally appreciated across Canada, nor is their work regarded as the sine qua non of landscape painting. As Thorneycroft observed with a chuckle, "the drive from Regina to Winnipeg is not exactly Group of Seven country."

Thorneycroft is a self-described perfectionist in her art. But her aesthetic is decidedly DIY and the results, especially with the dioramas, is "clunky, clumsy" – intentionally so. Amusingly for a photographer who's earned a significant international following in the last 20 years, Thorneycroft freely admits she doesn't know "how to do photography, just my photography." Which is why, at university, she teaches drawing, not the intricacies of Ansel Adams's grey scale. "I wouldn't teach photography if they paid me a million dollars," she said, "because then I'd have to learn how to do it."

Thorneycroft's methods today are pretty much the same as she used in the early 1990s to compose her now-famous series of self-portraits in black and white. In that case, she would go naked into a studio filled with various props – dolls, masks, fake penises and breasts, toy guns, ropes, chains, tubes, a wheelchair, a playpen, fish heads. After settling on a particular tableau, she'd turn off the lights and, in total darkness, begin taking pictures of herself with a mounted camera, the only source of illumination a flashlight she'd click on and off as she aimed it at various parts of herself. "A lot of artists go through phases of doing self-portraits," she observed. "I was one of them ... and since it was the '90s, there was feminist discourse on the body, gender politics, that sort of stuff, all of which got in there."

These days Thorneycroft isn't in the picture. But since a flashlight remains her preferred lighting source, what she gets from what she puts in front of her "is still very unpredictable. I mean, I never get the same thing twice. I have to rely on accident." Before she embraced digital, in 2007, this could be very expensive as she'd take a film roll of 10 images to a developer for processing, discover she didn't like anything there, take another 10 pictures, have them developed, discover something wrong with these, then start all over again. With digital, she said, "I can take 100 pictures and know it's wrong right away. And I can cut and paste."

Unsurprisingly for an artist who claims both Hieronymus Bosch and Peter Brueghel as influences, a Thorneycroft picture is usually dense with data. It took me at least three passes before I noticed the copy of Pierre Berton's *The Last Spike* scrunched in the stern of the canoe in *White Pine* and the Group of Dwarfs – a telling detail in what is a lascivious take on the Snow White story. And how about that avuncular guy in *Group of Seven Awkward Moments (Northern River)* showing his sail boat to a beaming

youth – are his pants really open and what's the bulge?

Thorneycroft already is hard at work on her next project which, like pretty much everything she's done, is a series ("I get so many ideas, a series is a way of putting parameters and perimeters on them. If I don't, things will spill out"). And like *Awkward Moments, Canada: Our People's History* will require her to manoeuvre models and dolls in her studio. This time, though, it's to a darker purpose – the illustration of various institutional abuses, crimes and acts of neglect that have blighted our past, such as Mt. Cashel, Africville, residential schools, the treatment of the Dionne quintuplets, sexual exploitation of young hockey players.

Thorneycroft is, of course, fully aware of the paradox here – "toys acting out moments that suggest psychological and sexual abuse." But, she stressed, "they're still toys. So the viewer will, on the one hand, allow himself or herself to realize, 'Oh, what I am seeing is clearly make-believe, but at the same time she's depicting something that represents evil.'"

Playful with a purpose – that might be the best way to describe this genial provocateur. And not a little courageous, too. For instance, she confessed with a guileless laugh that she hadn't really sought permission or clearance for most of the backdrops in the *Awkward Moments* series. "I just decided, I'm just gonna do it and see what happens. With all of today's issues over copyright and appropriation," she shrugged, "I think what I've done is gonna be the least of anybody's worries."