Espace Sculpture

Land and "See"
Site Specific Sculpture by Pat Schell

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SITE SPECIFIC SCULPTURE
BY **Pat Schell** JULIE HERC

Saint John, New Brunswick is a city of contrasts and contradictions. It demonstrates an exuberant coexistence between old and new, traditional and modern, conservative and provocative. The artistic community in this port city mirrors these polarities and reflects the tensions and paradoxes of an industrial city clinging to the fringe of a rugged yet beautiful coastline. *Deep See*, the highly successful visual arts festival held in Saint John this spring, celebrated and showcased a number of local artists in an atmosphere of conviviality, community and regional pride. Judging by the excitement and enthusiasm shown by both the artists and the public participants, it seems that Saint John citizens chose not to struggle with the dialectics of their locale, but to celebrate them instead.

Of the artists involved in the *Deep See* project, Pat Schell was invited to create a site- specific sculpture. Her work, entitled *Cargo*, was installed in the Loyalist Plaza in the city centre, at the foot of Saint John's main thoroughfare—King Street. The actual site of Schell's installation reflects the dichotomy of Canada's oldest incorporated city. The small patch of tended green space is adjacent to the original docking slip in this port city. Across the boulevard is the relatively new city hall with its landmark modernist sculpture by Claude Roussel. Ironically, when you turn toward King Street, you face some of the oldest architecture in the country. Schell's sculpture unifies and integrates these contrasts and dichotomies into an artistic statement of enthusiasm, optimism and cohesiveness. This is an artist who understands, appreciates and internalizes her sense of *"place"*. Pat Schell has spent her life living and working in this locale and her art expresses a profound connection to her home.

Schell's earlier site-specific land art, installed on the grounds of the Acacia Gallery in Gagetown, New Brunswick, used the landscape as a natural backdrop for her sculptures. The textures and lines of the landscape were aesthetically "woven" into the fabric of her work. But her sculpture in Saint John uses the site as a canvas. The work, installed on this small downtown plot, becomes a seamless reflection of the larger site—the city and maritime experience at large.

The sculpture is a stylized boat with cargo. Its proportions are on a human scale that neither overwhelm nor marginalize the viewer. *Cargo* is fourteen feet in length and stands over five feet high. The boat is formed by three elliptical wooden shapes, which overlap and appear to interlock. The lines of the three ovals flow and recede to form a seamless arc from "bow" to "stern". A solid wooden "keel" supports and cradles the under side, lending a sense of stability, direction and strength to the sculpture. The "boat" is painted a matte black with a single white line traversing its length. The smooth, calming rhythm of the sculpture, with its sense of a cradling motion, contrasts with its "cargo" of huge, grey-white sculpted stones. The "cargo"

contained in Schell's work is harsh and rough, the stylized stones, primitive and natural. They rest, — stable, secure and immutable. The contrast between the curved, smooth lines of the "boat" with its primal "cargo" is striking. An obvious dialectic exists between the constructed artifice of the "boat" and the stark reality of its seemingly unconstructed "cargo". Schell's sculpture harbors tension, but also resolution. The "boat" does not hold, but cradles, carries and protects its "cargo". Contradictions and tensions are reconciled, contrasts contained and transmuted. Schell's sculpture captures the essence of Saint John's contradictory personality and history. In this piece, the natural, untamable coast and sea evidently coexists with the human constructs of industry, urbanization and civilization. A purposeful and optimistic reconciliation brings obviously disparate elements together, and *Cargo's* real strength and cohesion lies in this convergence. There is an approachability and accessibility in this sculpture that is respectful and considerate of the viewer. Schell says to her audience—in this case, the whole of Saint John—, "see what we are and where we are heading, but do not lose sight of where we were and what we have lost." The viewer is nudged from a position of complacent acquiescence, yet is consoled or lulled by the calming overall gestalt of the sculpture. Schell seems to create this effect without obvious contrivance or any sense of didacticism. She works intuitively as an artist, gathering disparate elements into a harmonious whole.

In her work, Pat Schell has paid homage to her home and place. A respectful consideration typifies her sculpture and her work, reflecting her affinity to her physical landscape. *Cargo* is a compelling and relevant sculpture that deserves a permanent home in Saint John's eclectic cultural repertoire. ∎