




Crafting community in
**Newfoundland
& Labrador**

BY GAY DECKER

IMAGE: Robyn Love, *The Knitted Mile*, 2008. Handknit yarn, 57936 cm l (0.36 mi) x 10 cm w (4 in).
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ROBYN LOVE. PHOTO CREDIT: SHANNON STRATTON.



AFTER COMPLETING one of her gargantuan craft installations, Newfoundland artist Robyn Love came away with a renewed appreciation for how long a mile really is.

In 2008, as part of her participation in the show, *Gestures of Resistance: Craft and The Politics of Slowness*, Love and 90 other contributors spent hour after hour knitting up a bright yellow strip that the artist then laid down the middle of an old asphalt road in Dallas, Texas.

Even through the knitted dividing line was installed in the quiet of an early morning with few onlookers and only stayed there for an hour, the experience resonated deeply for Love.

"There were guys working who came out to watch and it took on this festive air," she says. "People really reacted to it in a positive way and that came out of the 'hand-madeness' of it. If I just had a man-made ribbon and put it down that would be one thing, but this was charged with something else."

The power of the hand crafted road strip became especially evident to Love while she was actually threading it through her fingers onto the road. When she had first started her ambitious project, she soon realized she couldn't do it alone. So while doing an interview on a Newfoundland radio station, she put out the call for assistance. To her delight, a keen group of women knitters from Parsons Pond, a small community on the island's Northern Peninsula, came to the rescue and helped Love complete her project. Remarkably, that morning Love could spot each maker's personal style in every section, even though all the knitters had followed the same pattern and used the same yarn.

"It became fairly intimate and it was so beautiful as it flowed through my hands. Each person really felt present," she says. "I mean it was just this kind of crummy, somewhat industrial road in Dallas, and just very anonymous and there I was with



Barb Hunt, *antipersonnel*, 1998 - ongoing. Knitted yarn. Dimensions variable.
PHOTO: ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

these wonderful ladies from Parsons Pond and their handiwork right there on the ground. And it changed the space. It really changed it."

Like Love, who values knitting's potential for human connection, several other artists in Newfoundland and Labrador also recognize the contribution that the handmade makes to a list of often intangible, but deeply important social needs like compassion, respect and peace.

Textile artist Barb Hunt, for example, has been knitting bright pink landmines since 1998. Each one is unique and made as close to manufacturer's specifications as possible, right down to the screws and clamps. So far, she has created about 100 of them, many of which have been exhibited at the Royal Military College Museum in Kingston, Ontario and at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Her goal is to knit one pink landmine for every design in existence, a feat she expects will take the rest of her days given there are currently 300 kinds and new ones are always being developed.

For Hunt, who describes her work as a gentle protest against weapons of terror, the slowness of the knitting process is essential her work's goals—to raise awareness and to provoke sympathy.

"I needed to make them very slowly. I think if I made them very fast, it wouldn't be honouring the lives of people who are hurt by them," she says. "I've learned that someone is hurt by a landmine every twenty minutes somewhere in the world. Sometimes I would just think: 'What is that? Two, three, four people who have been hurt while I was knitting this?'"

The meditative nature of knitting is also why Hunt turned to her needles and yarn after her father died, clicking out

hundreds of tiny woolen squares. (It was an experience that eventually led the artist to undertake larger, multi-disciplinary works that explore and celebrate grief rituals.)

"I turned to knitting and crocheting as a means to soothe myself and to repair," says Hunt. "There's something about making things that makes you feel like you're putting things back together. You're making things right again."

Craft making as a means for spiritual reparation is something avid recycler and multimedia artist, Nicola Hawkins, would probably understand. She and her partner rejuvenated an abandoned church in the rural community of Admiral's Cove by re-purposing discarded and found materials. Flat beach rocks were used as flooring; gas piping was refashioned into light fixtures and curtain rods and old tea tins were beaten flat and used as jubilant sheathes for tired out chests and bureaus.

The entire renovation project took five summers and a tremendous amount of labour, but for Hawkins the time spent making objects with her own hand are necessary to her fulfillment.

"When I'm making something, the time it takes is a joy and I hope in some way that's revealed in the final work," she says. "If something is handmade and it takes a lot of time, it doesn't necessarily make it beautiful or a great work of art, but there is a life lived in the object and I think that's the inherent attraction for me."

Hawkins' reverence for the slowly handcrafted object correlates directly with her disdain for the speed of consumerism, where we are encouraged to buy without thinking about an object's true meaning or value. It's a subject that she explored in her solo multimedia exhibit, *Junkosphere*, held at The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery in the spring of 2012.

Through large scale paintings that incorporated hundreds of disturbingly repetitive images from magazine advertisements and sculptures made from household items scavenged from her local landfill, Hawkins created compelling visual works that challenged viewers to think about the disastrous impact of a society based on insatiable, rapid-fire buying.

The sculpture, *Junkosphere*, after which the exhibit is named, is a menacing recreation of the globe we spin on. Continents are skewered with jutting rods, entangled with wires and spools and oceans are cluttered by floating islands of still more discarded stuff. A large two-dimensional work, *The Collector*, features a glamorous shopper who having successfully scoured the earth for all the latest cosmetics and gadgets has resorted to collecting its last living beings, right down to the fragile frog, whose disappearance will ultimately jeopardize even the collector's existence.

Making craft, then, for Hawkins, is a practical way of countering the ever-present pressure to consume. And, it's a way to ensure that the goods that we do purchase are created in sustainable and respectful ways.

"The nature of craft is that it is made within the community. A big part of the trouble I have with consumerism is that it's exploitive of communities that we don't know and we don't see," she says. "I've seen those factories, those communities where children make clothing that is exported to big chains in the west. So, when you see that hand knit sweater, that felted coat that someone so lovingly made, you know people haven't been exploited and even more than that...it's an act born of care."

Craft making as a means to connect with and care for other people was a big part of potter Isabella St. John's *Towers* series, which she exhibited at the Craft Council Gallery in 2006.

Fascinated with the concept of a tower as a place of security, but also great social and even physical deprivation, she started working through her idea of the ideal tower, asking herself what kind she would feel safest in.

To answer her question, she started making them. Her first tower, to scale, would have been 50 feet high and was completely secure having no opening at all; the second incorporated one opening and her final tower reached only to one story and included arches and entryways on every side.

"My final realization that came through the process of creating these towers was that peace is something that we create," she says. "And that we can only create it not by building walls and by making tall towers, but by taking down walls and opening up and coming together."

Mindful of her conclusion, St. John decided to extend her tower work to others. She made about 100 four-ounce balls of clay, which she then distributed to friends, family and acquaintances asking them to follow her lead and make towers they would feel safe in. St. John then glazed and fired their efforts and put them up for sale in the same space where her original towers were exhibited. These tiny, community-made towers were accompanied by information on Amnesty International, to which proceeds from the sales of the towers would be donated.

Perhaps the importance of the handmade to strong social relations is truly in the province's craft zeitgeist because the Craft Council Gallery Director, Sharon LeRiche, says the umbrella organization has also been thinking about new ways to reach out to its community.



Numerous Artists, Assorted Towers. Ceramic. Varied dimensions. Exhibited as part of *Towers*, a show featuring Isabella St. John's work, held at the Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador Gallery, 2006.

Just last year, they organized the show, *Nurture*, where locally made dinnerware was displayed alongside locally grown vegetables and locally made food. The neighbourhood chapter of the international organization Oxfam, which works to support sustainable communities worldwide, was invited to participate and a separate hand-building platter workshop was held so that participants could learn to make their own plates.

The response to the event was enthusiastic and for LeRiche, who is herself a weaver, it was an important part of raising awareness of how important craft and the locally made is to creating a connected and caring community, where people value sustainable, humane methods of production.

"Just as local farming makes us more aware of our food sources, the actual hands on making of an item helps us appreciate where the things we buy come from. We've noticed a renewed interest in 'making'...maybe it's because it puts us in contact with something our consumer society seems to be losing...the time and abilities to make our own things and to connect with each other at the same time," she says. "Craft is a way to touch that." ■