



Finding Art in the Everyday

DONNA AKREY DRAWS INSPIRATION FROM THE COMMON CLUTTER OF URBAN LIVING. **BY STEPHANIE VEGH**

I met with Donna Akrey to discuss her recent City of Hamilton Arts Award win, but she was far more eager to talk about her new box of ladybugs. Aphids were wreaking havoc upon her backyard, so she had ordered a shipment of ladybugs from a Niagara supplier to combat the infestation.

As she enthused over the insects lying dormant in her refrigerator until shaken out as needed like cooking spice, I came to understand the omnivorous curiosity that fuels her artistic practice. While some common qualities pull their threads through Akrey's work — humble materials and a playful sense of humour — her open-ended objects and experiences take many differing shapes and often call upon an active audience to find their resolution.

This was certainly true of the rolling clouds she presented at last year's Supercrawl (for which, in the interest of full disclosure, I provided curatorial support). The naïve simplicity of her pleasingly puffy clouds, when anchored to an industrial pipe and wobbly wheels, resulted in endearingly awkward objects that were paraded through the street by random passersby all weekend. Similarly, her recent exhibition at Rodman Hall Art Centre in St. Catharines provided both materials and display space for miniature sculptures created by gallery visitors.

Akrey, as both artist and educator, takes evident joy in using accessible materials more commonly found at a Home Depot (think insulating foam and Astroturf) — all the better to blur the boundaries between art and its audience. She frequently works with youth, seniors, even the natural world in experiments where she surrenders the authorship of her own name to a wider collaborative goal.

Such is her role as a member of (F)NOR, an artist collective comprising Andrea Carvalho, Svava Thordis Juliusson and Margaret Flood,

who received the City's Emerging Artist Award alongside Akrey. In addition to new presentations this summer at Hamilton Artists Inc. and ArtSpin, (F)NOR will appear in the Art Gallery of Windsor Triennial this fall and are devising new work with an assist from local photographer Jeff Tessier and the green screen studio at Hamilton Public Library's Makerspace.

These communal projects also help bring Akrey's ideas out of the relatively tight confines of a basement studio that is sometimes a hindrance to making; she often brings larger work into the backyard, aphids and all, when more space is needed. This limitation lends a scrappy resilience to her work and fuels her practice of making art through walking.

Like many artists and thinkers before her, Akrey values walking as an ideal vantage point for discovery; she has organized multiple artist projects around perambulation, and her roaming clouds followed this trajectory. She sees Hamilton as a potent site for this activity, where much of our public space is politically debated. Walking reveals the many ways that people move through our city, including the shortcomings of public transit and other built forms.

Akrey was born and raised in suburban Toronto but left in her 20s and has no intention of returning after trying out many Canadian cities: Vancouver, Montreal, Halifax, Calgary, and Montreal again before arriving in Hamilton. Part of this

wanderlust is rooted in her art training — a degree started at Simon Fraser University was carried over to Concordia, then finished at the Emily Carr University of Art and Design. A Master in Fine Art degree from Nova Scotia College of Art and Design followed, despite Akrey's lingering bemusement at higher learning. "I don't come from this," she admits, though she has since found a natural fit in teaching at Brock University.

Her perspective is coloured by her past life as a mail carrier for Canada Post, a job she held for 18 years that inevitably overlapped with her art. She would carry a camera and notebook on her mail route to document her many visual fascinations: the fake living rooms of apartment building lobbies, an ever-changing view of English Bay captured daily from a gas station window.

The walking and exploration afforded by mail delivery fed Akrey's endless curiosity, but frustrations rose rapidly to the surface on her new mail route after graduating from NSCAD, where daily deliveries to the Art Gallery of Halifax threw the disconnect between her art and working life into harsh relief. "Everyone has ideas," she says. "An artist is someone who makes the time to do things."

That persistence to make in the face of doubt and financial uncertainty is familiar to many artists, and time as much as stubbornness has shaped the career Akrey enjoys today. After a lifetime of living and learning in cities all across Canada, Akrey has found a warm and welcoming community in Hamilton, where she finds well-meaning wariness of rapid change balanced by open-mindedness to new ideas. "Something about Hamilton knowing it's different makes it think different," says Akrey.

This delight in difference is best revealed in a slideshow on her website playing out the results of a rapacious photographic practice: common sights captured on walks from 1995 to the present day that, while misleadingly ordinary, share lapses in conventional design, cryptic signage, colours that collide by chance to make accidental moments of art.

"Maybe it's survival," she muses, thinking back on a suburban upbringing marked by banality and ugliness, but "you train your eye to what is really there. Art isn't in the Van Goghs or the flowers... it's in the way things are balanced, the way one colour sits next to another."