

Ambitious Greenw*sh engages and educates

Open Space's living, community project treats audience as partner

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Times Colonist

Greenw*sh

Where: Open Space

When: June 10 – July 23

Rating: ★★★★★ ½

Robert Hengeveld wanted to create the utopian lawn — what all lawns wish they could be, as he says.

But even the most immaculate lawn isn't flawless.

It's something that Toronto-based artist discovered in the process of building his installation, *Kentucky Perfect*, one of many works in Open Space's Greenw*sh show. It runs to July 23 and also features work by Kyath Battie, Rachel Evans, Scott Evans, Marlene Jess and Xane St. Phillip.

Kentucky Perfect is a 4.5-metre stretch of sod that sits in an elevated aluminum tray near the gallery's door. It gets everything it should need, thanks to an automated system. A scanner-like light rolls back and forth over the bluegrass, pausing every 20 minutes to make way for a reel mower that trims any possible growth. About once a day (depending on humidity), another boom sweeps over the grass, misting it with water.

It's absurd, but only a marginal exaggeration of our cultural interaction with our lawns, where gas-powered mowers and automated sprinkler systems maintain the patches of green that somehow reflect our quality as neighbours.

But even under these ideal circumstances, Hengeveld learned the process was fallible.

"The nature of trying to control something to this extent is that it never really works out," he said at the opening Friday. The machines need regular maintenance and as the installation moves from place to place, humidity is irregular.

Kentucky Perfect, named for the exotic breed of bluegrass that became a symbol of North American urban ecosystems, challenges our relationship with the natural environment — a theme shared by many Greenw*sh pieces.

The collection of works is an enormously ambitious project — because it goes beyond the conventional creator-observer relationship and attempts to build community within its audience.

Yes, pieces like Hengeveld's are more traditional: The artist creates, the observer reflects.

But the ideas the observer takes away from

one piece can be actively applied to another.

Rachel Evans' performance piece *Walk Like a Penguin* puts participants in the webbed feet of another species, encouraging us to consider a non-human perspective at the same time as examining our tendency to anthropomorphize animals.

In *H2OMG*, Marlene Jess looks at the commodification of our greatest natural resource, bottling water from Victoria's six public fountains and handing them out for free.

Beyond that, Greenw*sh educates. St. Phillip will give a lesson on designing green walls — matrices of plant-life built on structural faces that take green roofs to another dimension.

It engages. The audience isn't just an onlooker, but a partner who scrapbooks green media reports and maps urban farms and eco-friendly businesses in the city.

It even inverts the lens on itself, exploring ways that the gallery can become greener. They're starting with worms in the kitchen.

As with any healthy ecosystem, this one is ever changing. Through the course of the show, many of the pieces will transform as sprouts sprout, as audience input grows.

Yes, it's ambitious — but promising. Greenw*sh is a living, community project that is fun, clever and critical all at once.