

VISUAL ARTS



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Toronto's Robert Hengeveld is a young artist with some age-old concerns. Join the club: Explorations like his, of our paved-over, manufactured world's estrangement from nature, have produced art of all sorts, good and bad, for decades.

It's an easy button to push, especially here: Nature has always loomed large in our self-perception as woodsy Canadians in tune with the idyllic order of things. We take such disruptions personally, in life and art alike; try casting a critical eye on the Group of Seven, as I've done now and again, and you'll see what I mean.

In the right hands, though, this is nearly inexhaustible terrain, and Hengeveld certainly has them. His central preoccupation is on display in two places right now: Mercer Union and Harbourfront Centre, where his installation "Pickled Tense" is a study in elegant understatement.

In a slim, boxed-in vitrine, salt trickles from a hole pricked in the ceiling, massing slowly into a pile on the floor. There's more than a hint of old-school conceptualism here, with a work concerned with process, increment and the inexorable slippage of time. But there's also the guiding structure of a contrived circumstance — an elemental process abruptly shoved in a box and rendered suitable for viewing.

Over the weeks, the vitrine will slowly fill to the brim. Hengeveld writes that the piece embodies "a rhythm that is all around us," in the



A deflated deer gives a rather blunt clue as to the barbed intent of Robert Hengeveld's *Natural Revision*.

To the woods, via our urban estrangements

Robert Hengeveld's manufactured terrain forces us to ponder our Canuck embrace of mythical nature



Robert Hengeveld's faux wilderness at Mercer Union.

constant thrum of primal forces, but one to which we're largely deaf, "given the instantaneous nature of our contemporary culture." That's one way to put it.

Here's another: If a tree falls in the forest and you can't find it on YouTube, does anybody care?

Uptown at Mercer Union, Hengeveld's installation "Natural Revision" abandons such subtleties. The entrance to the gallery space looks like a construction site crafted by the cast of *Fubar* — all ramshackle 2 x 4 framing and crushed cardboard beer flats compressed into makeshift structural reinforcement.

This is the first clue, applied via sledgehammer, that the environment you're about to enter is as far from natural as you'll find. Past the rough framing is a man-made glade of taped-together cardboard boxes masquerading as cliffs, astro-turf, a tinsel faux-waterfall and a pair of inflatable deer.

At first glance, the effect is of a lazy weekend prank by a gang of bored stoners. (A thatch of two-tone green shag carpet masquerading as grass doesn't hurt.)

That's surely part of the point: For many, natural communion is a stack of empty beer cases drained fireside at a paved campsite parking lot. Think a little deeper, though, and the joke's on us all. Most of us have been simulating nature, in some form, all our lives, from grade-school dioramas to the eternal struggle for manicured gardens and immaculately green, weed-free backyard lawns.

Hengeveld's aggressive fakery adopts a hyperbolic stance to propose a greater truth: In the depths of our estrangement, maybe manufactured nature really is the most we can handle.

Robert Hengeveld's "Pickled Tense" is at Harbourfront Centre's York Quay until June 12. "Natural Revision" is at Mercer Union, 1286 Bloor St. W., until April 30.