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Reading Our Rights

Artists ponder words, freedoms and ideas

by Gregory Beatty

Becoming Book

Sherwood Village Gallery

Until March 17

Freedom to Read Week 2013 is Feb. 24-March 2. It's annual event that, in the words of organizers, is intended to encourage Canadians to "think about and reaffirm their commitment to intellectual freedom."

That's a fundamental right in Canada, protected under s. 2 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It's not confined simply to freedom of thought, either. It also involves freedom of conscience, press, expression, association and assembly. But these days, both here in Canada and around the world, intellectual freedom is arguably under attack from several quarters. Some attacks are politically

motivated, others are sparked by religion and greed.

And while the attackers might make some short-term gains, long-term, humanity will inevitably suffer.

Becoming Book was organized as part of the RPL's commemoration of Freedom to Read Week. It features three artists: Troy Gronsdaahl (Saskatoon), Ève K. Tremblay (Montreal/Berlin/New York) and Lee Henderson (formerly of Regina, now living in Toronto).

"Each artist in *Becoming Book* engages in an active dialogue with the printed word, assuming a role more 'writerly' than 'readerly'," writes Blair Fornwald in her curatorial statement. That makes the show something of a corollary to Freedom to Read Week.

But really, reading is inextricably linked to writing. The first can't happen without the second.

Or can it?

That's a question Henderson examines in *Refinement Pavilion*. The installation consists of three cremation urns displayed on a shelf. Two hold the ashes of first editions of books by Vladimir Nabokov (*Laura*) and Franz Kafka (*The Trial*). The third is empty, and Henderson is currently on the lookout for a first edition of Emily Dickenson's *Collected Poems*. Once he finds one, and raises the cash to purchase it (because first editions by famous authors don't come cheap), he intends to burn it and deposit the ashes in the urn.

Book burning is a potent symbol of intellectual oppression and Henderson is clearly referencing



that here. But there's more going on than that. The first editions he's selected were all published posthumously, against the author's wishes. In Nabokov's case, the manuscript for *Laura* (which consisted of 138 hand-written index cards) was not even complete.

Laura was published 30 years after Nabokov's death and was not well-received by critics. Did this tar Nabokov's legacy? Perhaps, but it wasn't his decision to trample his rights as an author by publishing the manuscript

Other issues Henderson raises in *Refinement Pavilion* include the fetishization of precious objects, and (through the cremation urns) the extent to which we associate artists with their work so that their identity as flesh-and-blood humans gets erased.

In *Make Way for Magic! Make Way For Objective Mysteries*, Grons Dahl engages in his own act of erasure — taking the notorious political manifesto *Le Refus Global* published by 16 Quebec artists and intellectuals in 1948 and reducing it to three words.

The tract, whose title translates as “Total Refusal”, called on Quebecers to break free of the forces of oppression and hidebound tradition in the province — as represented by the clergy and privileged Anglo elite.

When Grons Dahl read the manifesto he was struck by an exhortation it contained to make way for magic and objective mysteries. Using old letterpress technology, he printed the words “magic” and “objective mysteries” on sheets of paper — some of which are on display, while others are packaged in box sets.

Read one way, his work could be seen as a critique of how, in this age of information overload, we often condense (sometimes out of necessity, other times out of laziness) our engagement with cultural artifacts like *Le Refus Global*. Inevitably, this limits our ability to understand their significance. That, in turn, can make us vulnerable to manipulation — witness the NRA's success with its “second amendment” argument which it uses to justify the possession of weapons far deadlier than any “arms” that existed at the time the U.S. constitution was drafted.

What I've described so far doesn't contain much magic or objective mystery. That comes in a second component — where Grons Dahl displays two blobs of silver metal under Plexiglas.

I could tell you what they represent. But that would ruin the mystery — and the magic. So you best see the installation for yourself. But the blobs are a potent metaphor for the power of words to inspire and transform society — which is ultimately what the artists and intellectuals did with *Le Refus Global*.

Tremblay's installation is titled *Becoming Fahrenheit 451*. SF fans will instantly recognize the reference to Ray Bradbury's 1953 classic *Fahrenheit 451*. Set in a dystopian future where books are outlawed and people live docile lives watching soaps and other mindless entertainment on wall-size TVs, the novel is traditionally interpreted as a statement against censorship.

That's not unjustified, as the central character, Montag, is a “fireman” whose job involves ferreting out caches of books hidden by radicals and torching them. As well, in the novel Bradbury partly attributes the decline of reading to censorship pressure that rendered books blander and blander until they were indistinguishable from mass market entertainment.

But *Fahrenheit 451* also serves as a scathing indictment of electronic media like TV and film and their tendency to “dumb-down” discussion and debate by relying on emotionally charged images instead of rational words. Given our current obsession with spectacle in sports and entertainment (Fox News, anyone? *Honey Boo Boo*? *Jersey Shore*? *Super Bowl XLVII*?), it seems Bradbury's vision has pretty much come to pass.

At the end of *Fahrenheit 451*, Montag, having been transformed through his contact with a quixotic 17-year-old named Clarisse and his own stolen cache of books, flees his home and job and meets up with a group of exiled bibliophiles who have memorized entire books in the hope that society will one day wish to rediscover them.

That's Tremblay's aim, as documented in her installation — which includes photographs, letters and a book work — to become one of Bradbury's “book people” by memorizing all 179 pages of *Fahrenheit 451*.

Compelling stuff and a compelling exhibition. I like the title, too. *Becoming Book*, hmm, BB. Didn't George Orwell once write about someone with those initials who didn't care for freedom of speech?