

VISUAL ART

'Babbling' introduced to Internet generation

With respect to his latest project, Lee Henderson isn't entirely sure whether he is creating *Babylon + on + on*, or curating it. Fact is, he's doing both. Taking an existing work from the permanent collection at the MacKenzie Art Gallery and elaborating on it makes the piece "a little less museological, if that's a word," Henderson says with a smile.

The piece in question is "The Tower of Babbling," an abstract work created in 1955 by Toronto artist Harold Town, a member of Painters Eleven, the group of likeminded urbanites who presented themselves as the antithesis of the tree-hugging Group of Seven. The painting, oil on masonite, was purchased by the MacKenzie in 1958 — the first acquisition by a gallery in its formative years.



Town created "The Tower of Babbling" in a studio from which he had an unobstructed view of what was to become a CBC television station, beginning as construction was getting underway and finishing the painting just as the building itself was being completed. His aim was to produce a piece of art that would correspond to the construction of a building, in terms of what he saw but also what he heard. He wanted to connect his studio to the larger world outside that studio.

And this, if you'll pardon the pun, is where Lee Henderson comes into the picture. Roughly half a century later, he is taking "The Tower of Babbling" into the digital age, and introducing it to the Internet generation.

"Harold Town wanted to put sound into the painting," Henderson says. "What I've tried to do is put sound around the painting as well as inside it."

In the allotted space, in the upper-level lobby of the MacKenzie, where *Babylon + on + on* will be shown from Dec. 7 through Jan. 25, "The Tower of Babbling" will be displayed surrounded by scaffolding, to suggest construction. There will be paint cans nearby to enhance the imagery and also a paint brush that will be "wired" to serve as a wand. The "brush" will activate sounds from within the four sides of the site.

"If you think of the painting as a computer screen," Henderson says, "the brush would be the mouse. I suppose you could also compare it to channel-surfacing, with the painting being a television set, and the brush a remote control."

In this highly interactive installation, the wand/brush will trigger audio loops, some as brief as several seconds, some as long as two minutes in duration. These were created by students of Dr. Charity Marsh, who teaches courses in new media at the University of Regina, where Henderson himself is an instructor in visual art and computer science.

"I'm really impressed by the loops provided by the students," Henderson says. "The point of bringing in other people, or at least part of it, is that it challenges authorship."

Henderson has also recorded noises, everyday sounds, that Town might have heard if he was walking back and forth from a studio on 15th Avenue, say, to the CBC Broadcast Centre on Broad Street. He is also hoping that CBC will co-operate in providing clips from within that building as well.

In the gallery itself, there will be microphones installed that will pick up vibrations from various means of contact with the floor, be it a footstep, or someone sitting down, or someone dropping something inadvertently, etc. The gallery will also be providing access to *Babylon + on + on* from its Web site.

Eventually, the inevitable question arises: What would Harold Town make of all of this?

"I don't know," Henderson says. "It's consistent with his concepts."

After a pause, he continues: "I wouldn't want people to think this is a toy. My hope is to give people an entirely different set of access points into a painting, a work of abstract art."

■ Visual Art appears every second Thursday.
Convey your news and express your views to the columnist at nmiliokas@leaderpost.canwest.com.