

SPRING/SUMMER 2015

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ARTICULATE

The first word on arts, culture and heritage in the Columbia Basin



WAR & PEACE: TSUNEKO KOKUBO & TORU FUJIBAYASHI
BACK TO THE COUNTRY: SAGEGRASS
FERNIE AT WAR

REFUSE CULTURE: IAN JOHNSTON
HIP HOP GIRL: AMBER SANTOS
DISASTER IN PARADISE



NEW BOOKS AND MUSIC
ARTS AND HERITAGE NEWS

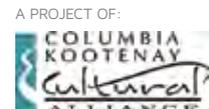
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DIGGING THROUGH OUR PAST



Serendipity strikes again. In my email conversations with Invermere author Elinor Florence, whose novel, *Bird's Eye View*, is reviewed in this issue, we discovered our common Saskatchewan ties. Her family had a cabin on the same lake as my father's family; her mother used to live in the same town as my aunt and uncle. Most interestingly, her novel describes a young woman from the Battlefords

who joins the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War to work overseas. My father joined the RCAF at age 19 after meeting and being inspired by some of the British airmen who were stationed at the Commonwealth air training base near North Battleford. He'd never been off the farm, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Here is a link to a CBC Radio interview with Elinor Florence about her novel:

www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bird-s-eye-view-author-elinor-florence-pays-tribute-to-canadian-women-in-wwii-1.2991531

I've been reading an interesting book called *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, written by Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum in London. MacGregor and his staff chose 100 artifacts from the museum's collection to illuminate the progress of human history, from two million years ago to the present. The book begins with a stone chipping tool from Tanzania and ends with an HSBC Visa card. A photograph of each object is accompanied by a short essay that describes how it was made and why, and places it in the context of the world at that time. I learned more from a five-page essay about a clay tablet found in southern Iraq than in all my high school history classes.

It's funny and sad at the same time to speculate on what future historians will make of the objects that will survive from our present civilization. I can't begin to imagine how the mountains of trash resulting from our thirst for water in plastic bottles will be interpreted, for instance. Or what they'll think of LEGOLAND and Disney World. Will they be as incomprehensible as standing stones and burial mounds once were for us?

Two of the artists that we feature in this issue of *ARTiculate* are already making their own statements about one of our cultural artifacts—the garbage that proliferates in our waste stream. Ian Johnston's installation, *The Chamber*, challenges our relationship to acquisition and our seeming indifference to the sheer volume of our belongings that have become irrelevant and abandoned. Ian's work—part installation, part performance piece—seeks to confront, inform and move us to consider the implications of what we carry around with us in our lives.

José Luis Torres also uses discarded goods in his assemblages, creating wall pieces and free-standing structures from seemingly unrelated objects. His work is built on-site from bits and pieces that he has retrieved from the local waste stream. It is quirky, gravity defying and thought provoking. Torres has been invited to be Oxygen Art Centre's artist in residence this August.

Margaret Tessman, editor

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IAN JOHNSTON: *THE CHAMBER*



by Margaret Tessman

When it comes to consumption, Western culture is the great enabler. We are bombarded with print ads, billboards and magazine spreads, while the click of a mouse gives us access to blogs, flash sales, eBay, Etsy and every online commercial presence our hearts could desire. Some of us are hoarders, some of us feel more comfortable with fewer belongings, but all of us are susceptible to the message that new, more, faster, trendier, flashier and more expensive equates with better. As objects lose their value, need is trumped by want; obsolescence and renewal are constant states of mind.

Meanwhile, the waste stream of our discarded, outmoded, unwanted goods continues to grow exponentially. We are suffocating on our garbage.

In his new installation, *The Chamber*, artist Ian Johnston examines the themes of consumption and material waste in a tangible way. He collects unwanted items and integrates them into his assemblages, adding a performance piece twist that asks viewers to go beyond the surface of the accumulated goods.

The key element of *The Chamber* is a massive white nylon bag that envelops the pile of objects. The bag slowly inflates and deflates, while a recorded soundtrack plays. "It's one big inhale and exhale," says Ian. The first time I watched a video of the bag (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TmBe16lUkE>), I was reminded of a giant jellyfish embracing a mountain of garbage on the ocean. The motion of the bag is so mesmerizing; you

▲ *The Chamber* inflated

▼ *The Chamber* deflated Photos: Ian Johnston



forget what you are watching, which is part of Ian's point. He brings us back to reality with a jolt as the bag deflates to reveal its contents: plastic kitchenware; discarded furniture; an Osmond Brothers album. The detritus of our lives has returned for us to contemplate. Objects that were once important to someone have become mundane and worse, disposable.

Ian developed some of the mechanics for *The Chamber* during a summer residency at Oxygen Art Centre in Nelson. "That summer was instrumental in designing, testing and



The Chamber detail

working the bugs out of the project," he says. *The Chamber* is the third part of a trilogy of installations called *Reinventing Consumption* that Ian has worked on since 2010. The inflatable bag evolved from a vacuum process that Ian has used for his ceramics production. A wet clay slab is draped over an object and wrapped in a bag. Then the air is sucked out and the clay adheres tightly to the object, taking on its essential shapes. Vacuum forming is not new—it can be used to bend wood, for example—but the application for *The Chamber* is Ian's own creation. "So many inventions are a result of accidents when people are looking for something else. It's unpredictable," he says.

Ian was inspired to use the vacuum technology in a mega form as he developed the ideas for *The Chamber*. "It was when the Occupy movement was happening. I thought about the quantity of goods in our lives and considered building a two-part bag—one minimalist, one representing the contents of a typical one-bedroom apartment," he says. The idea captured the imagination of curators and Ian went to work. The esthetics of the piece made Ian decide that one bag was enough, and he decided to use materials already in the waste stream. "I thought I'd borrow from the Salvation Army in each place I installed the piece," he says. Of course, Salvation Army dumpsters don't produce goods to order. "It became more complicated than I thought," says Ian. "I have to take goods with me to create the installation. Reality gets in the way sometimes."

The Chamber will be on display at the Access Gallery in Vancouver from June 5 to July 18. Another iteration of the piece will be mounted at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Jacksonville, Florida, in November. *Fish Tales* will be hung in a 40-foot tall atrium in the museum. "I'm very excited," says Ian. The underpinnings of the piece will entail the installation of a device that can bear the load of the waste items that will be strung on chains, including shopping carts and baskets. *Fish Tales* was made possible by a grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation.

The working title of Ian's newest project is *Modern Manias*, which takes the examination of consumption further to address hoarding behaviour. As a first step, Ian made and exhibited a video, *At the End of the Tunnel*, in Dawson Creek. He and his helpers built a wall of newspapers and then collapsed it, while filming from six different angles. "It took two weeks to build," he says. "The video examines the point at which hoarding becomes a hazard to self, a sort of suicide."

Website: ianjohnstonstudio.com

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