

Ryszard Litwiniuk *Back to the Roots*

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Ryszard Litwiniuk: Back to the Roots

GILL MCELROY



For a decade, now, the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington (VAC) has run an "Art on Public Land" series, using the gallery grounds — a municipal park in a small hollow of land bounded by downtown Bowmanville and Highway 401 on the north and south, and Soper Creek and housing subdivisions to the east and west — as a place to mount site-specific outdoor sculptural installations. Simon Frank and Anne O'Callaghan (amongst others) have worked this space, and done so to great effect.

But things change, and in the summer of 2004, Soper Creek Park was re-landscaped by the municipality. The siting of temporary, site-specific sculpture wasn't a part of the civic plan. Newly installed flower beds, parking lot lighting, and a dry creek bed spanned by a small bridge have, alas, put an end to the use of this green space by the VAC for further installations (though the "Art on Public Lands" series will apparently continue at alternative locations). A project by Mississauga-based sculptor Ryszard Litwiniuk, then, has formally drawn an end to this incarnation of what has been a damn good idea.

Litwiniuk's *Back to the Roots* comprised two seemingly simple elements that shared a common pedigree: the tree. Actually, the two components of the installation were but variations on a theme wherein Litwiniuk reconstructs a tree — of sorts. From a base for each component — which is, in fact, a lateral slice of an actual tree, a relatively thick chunk, still clad with its existing ring of exterior bark — he has worked vertically, building an artefactual version of the trunk. And in keeping with the manner in which nature marks time in a tree via interior rings representing yearly growth, Litwiniuk did likewise — in a way. So here's what we were given to see: the two aforementioned slabs of tree trunk (which, it could be argued, would pass for tree stumps), from which emanated what resembled a series of nested wooden boxes that, like Russian dolls, became progressively smaller as they moved further away from the source stumpage, and which gently torqued and curved to one side as they did so. In one piece, the last of the nested boxes was solid — closed off at the end — but in the other, it was left open. And the component with the closed end was lying on its side on the grass, as if toppled over, while the open-ended work was set standing upright.

Now, Litwiniuk makes a neat interconnection between the natural and the artefactual in *Back to the Roots*. To begin with, the right-angles of the box-like forms protruding from the stumps are shapes not commonly found in nature, but are predominant in the realm of artefacts. Nature generally abhors such simplistic geometry, while we embrace it, and in fact impose it upon the natural world. So at the very least, Litwiniuk's work underscored the unbalanced nature of that relationship.

But equally importantly, there's an exploration of the very nature of the artefactual itself undertaken here (and the pun is most definitely intended) — an enquiry into craft and the making of things. Firstly, wood has, of course, always been a primary material for

the making of things, spanning artefactual extremes from, say, such basic adaptations as walking sticks fashioned from tree limbs, to the comparative sophistication of utensils like bowls and plates, to construction materials for homes and the like. *Back to the Roots* reiterates that relationship, as Litwiniuk situates overtly artefactual structures — social and cultural products — as emerging from a chunk of actual tree trunk (the natural world). His piece also mirrors the process of transformation Soper Creek Park has undergone, as it too evolved into the artefact it is from the small pocket of wild it once was. This is, after all, hardly a place of nature unblemished and untouched. Though the lazy meander of the creek along one side of the park is home, still, to salmon, this is an area that underwent radical transformation long before the creation of the park — or even the VAC itself, housed as it is in a building long used as a barley mill. For all intents and purposes, this was a place once something akin to an industrial park, and since that role has long since been evacuated, nature has made something of a return, if only in the form of the fescue that comprises the park lawn. Still, the grass here is hardly indigenous, and the new landscaping imposed upon the site has absolutely nothing to do with any effort to restore the original microenvironment. This is now an overtly manufactured landscape, shaped from the accidental landscape that replaced the industrial one that itself displaced what was originally here.

So there we have it: *Back to the Roots* fits right in. Too bad it won't last. On second thought, maybe that's exactly as it should be. ←

Gill MCELROY is a poet, independent curator, and critic. He is the author of *Gravity & Grace: Selected Writings on Contemporary Canadian Art*.

Ryszard Litwiniuk: *Back to the Roots*
Visual Arts Centre of Clarington,
Bowmanville, Ontario
June, 2004 – June, 2005

Ryszard LITWINIUK,
Back to the Roots,
2004-2005. Maple,
stainless steel, wire.
1.3 x 3 x 1.14 m & 2.7 x
1.14 x 1.4 m. Art on
Public Lands Project.
The Visual Arts Centre
of Clarington,
Bowmanville (ON).

