

**Katie Bethune-Leamen: *Mushroom Studio***

Toronto Sculpture Garden, [www.torontosculpturegarden.com](http://www.torontosculpturegarden.com),  
To April 15, 2009

John K. Grande

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a self-portrait with Belmore lying naked on a stark white bed. She is seen from the behind—as if a reversal of Manet's *Olympia*. Her back has a hideously long scar running diagonally from her right shoulder to left hip. The wound is sutured with beaded thread. Belmore does not often employ traditional Aboriginal motifs. I wonder if in this exception if she is suggesting that traditional means might be a source of healing or that her injuries are collective, First Nations injuries?

While the themes are often dark and the attitude elegiac and angry, the resistance displayed here elevates the spirit. Supplementing *Rising to the Occasion* is a must read book, the most important collection of writings on Belmore's work to date and some of the best writing on a contemporary, Canadian First Nations artist yet published. □

1 *White Thread*, 2003  
Inkjet on watercolour paper  
amloops Art Gallery Collection  
2007-001  
Purchased with the support  
of the Canada  
Council for the Arts Acquisition  
Assistance Program  
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

2 *Untitled 2*, 2004  
Three inkjet prints on watercolour  
paper  
Collection of Donald Ellis  
and Mary Ann Bastien  
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

3 *Untitled 1*, 2004  
Three inkjet prints on watercolour  
paper  
Collection of Donald Ellis  
and Mary Ann Bastien  
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

## TORONTO, ONT.

# KATIE BETHUNE-LEAMEN MUSHROOM STUDIO

John K. Grande



Toronto Sculpture Garden  
115 King Street East  
Toronto, Ont.  
Tel.: (416) 515-9658  
[www.torontosculpturegarden.com](http://www.torontosculpturegarden.com)  
Hours: Daily, 8 am – dusk  
Free admission  
To April 15, 2009

*Mushroom Studio*, 2008  
19'8" x 20'  
Steel, foam, wood, rubber,  
paint, furniture

For this, Katie Bethune-Leamen's first ever outdoor installation, the artist has developed a work that references the artist's place of work, and the process of her art. By way of intention, the concept calls to mind Vera Frenkel's *The Institute* conceived as a place of residence for elderly artists. In this case, the piece is three-dimensional and very much in place, whereas Frenkel's was mostly web, though a show at Hart House Gallery reaffirmed the concept and direction of that piece. Visually the piece has that same 1960s look, as do drive-ins and highway lunch stops and shiny diners, as well as over-sized road signs and billboards of those times. One would almost expect Elvis to appear in a set designed like this, but alas, he is in hiding. These structures emphasized an alternative, and built as architectural, or structural realities, they embodied a landscape of desire, one that propelled a post-war consumer economy. And these phenomena likewise inspired the Pop artists, notably Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist and others. Montreal's Orange Julep near Decarie, Colborne Ontario Big Apple bakery on the highway 401 west of Toronto, and so many others still linger on the landscape, roadside attractions that are latter day icons of the nostalgia of another era.

And so we now have clones of that era, and of Claes Oldenburg's Hamburger sculptures in newly generated works such as Paul McCarthy's *Blockhead* (2003) seen outside the TateModern in London. The caricature begets the caricature. Which source? Whose source? Katie Bethune-Leamen, on the other hand, takes a different tack, and approaches her subject with a certain sense of practicality. Both utilitarian and visually comic, this mushroom is architecture. Based on the *Amanita Pantherina* – a cousin of the red-capped *Amanita Muscaria*, its base has a door you can enter into, that contains the artist's miniaturized studio. Like an image from a children's fairytale, one would almost expect the Cheshire cat to be sitting there, or some Germanic folkloric figure. It all looks so surreal amid the downtown Toronto hustle and bustle of condominiums, hotels, shops, restaurants, parks and businesses. As Bethune-Leamen states: "By creating a workspace as an artwork, I am making a Moebius-strip cycle of production that proposes pragmatic questions about the usability of art, and the ability of artists to live through their art."

*Mushroom Studio* is lived-in art that can generate art. Art begets art. All this in the parentheses of time. The artist will be in her studio at times – quixotically – unpredictably – during the garden's opening hours. At various times throughout the year, the artist will be on site making art in her artwork. Visitors are welcome to stop by and chat about process!