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## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"If you want a symbolic gesture, don't burn the flag; wash it.."

Norman Thomas

### Demolition delights

Decaying, abandoned pink house fascinates artist Torrell  
By ELISSA BARNARD Arts Reporter

PEOPLE walk by demolition sites all the time, but something about a crumbling house in Halifax's north end made artist Ehryn Torrell stop in her tracks.

For one thing, it was pink. The back was peeled off, exposing both the first and second floors, so it looked like her childhood doll's house. Later, Torrell learned the house had a murky history that included two alleged murders and that kept changing depending on who was telling the story.

Torrell felt compelled to paint the decaying, abandoned pink house at the corner of Creighton and Charles Streets where now there is only an empty lot.

Her giant paintings and mixed media drawings, in The Pink House at Anna Leonowens Art Gallery through Dec. 10, are visually fascinating piles of jagged boards and rubble painted in browns and greys with flashes of pink and turquoise.

At first, you just see debris, but then tantalizing details emerge: a hammer, an isolated newel post, bits of insulation and fencing, hanging string, black caverns beneath gaping boards.

Torrell intentionally combines representational detail with areas that are less detailed and more imaginative and poetic. Though based on one particular place, The Pink House speaks about many places, she says, as a metaphor for "neglect and loss and marginality and abandonment."

"I wanted it to be about many different places and experiences," she said in a talk at the gallery.

This series of work comes out of a question Torrell asked herself when she arrived as a master of fine arts student at NSCAD University: "What is my meaningful subject as a person involved in image-making?"

Always interested in architecture and the body's relationship to the built environment, she studied social theory, philosophy and urban geography.

"That didn't really help me make the paintings here," she said. "Philosophy almost hindered what I was going to do.

"I kept remembering this pink house I'd seen in September 2003 just a few weeks after I moved here. The whole back was torn off as if this giant had come in and taken off the back himself.

"It was this enticing, terrifyingly vulnerable site, this big doll's house that reminded me of my doll's house."

At the same time, it was scary.

"You never knew if it was being built up or torn down," said Torrell, whose art is often about in-between spaces at either construction or demolition sites.

In January of this year, she saw a city notice stapled to the house condemning it as a dangerous and unsightly property. She knew the house's days were numbered.

"I decided to walk to the house every day."

People came up to her at the site and told her fascinating unproven stories. She heard the house was abandoned for up to 37 years, that the man who'd lived there was a bootlegger. Some people called it the "murder house."



Witness is extrapolated from one of the photographs Ehryn Torrell took of a north-end Halifax house as it was being demolished.



Close-up of hammer and dust mask in In Amongst the Ruins by Ehryn Torrell.



Ehryn Torrell's MFA thesis exhibition is a series of paintings and mixed media works on paper about a pink house that was demolished in Halifax's north end. It's showing at Anna Leonowens Gallery. (DAREN PITTMAN / Staff)

"People often knew the house was connected to the murder of two women. A man killed his wife by pushing her down the stairs and ran over his girlfriend in the driveway," Torrell said, adding the murders were never proven.

"There was a constant haunting about these stories. So many stories kept coming back in different ways."

She also started thinking about an abandoned cottage in her own family, a building her grandmother owned. Torrell became interested in "how places become meaningful through memory, association and storytelling," she says, "how places that are like strangers to us can build not only empathy within us, but also tell us something about who we are, how we perceive and what our imaginations are capable of seeing."

As a painter, Torrell says, she is like a carpenter.

"I had this built up," she says, standing in front of a section of her giant triptych *In Amongst the Ruins*, "then I went, oh, no, I need to break open the space.

"In the rubble, you could do anything with it. I could make things up."

These paintings are based on photographs and video footage Torrell took as the house was being demolished, but they were only a starting point. From there, she ventured off in her own direction.

"I can't know exactly what I'm doing," she says. "I need to go in and respond and make things up."

There is a purposeful tension between parts that are photographic and parts that are imaginative spaces.

"I was negotiating between abstractness, looseness and more representation," she said. "I'm not interested in it being a documentary so I wanted to avoid having every aspect meticulously drawn to life. I didn't think that could evoke a memory or a space of your own or poetry."

Details like a pink hula-hoop amid the debris and turquoise beams are accurate, though. "A couple of people said the turquoise on the wood says it's in Halifax. It's common, I guess."

Torrell rendered the objects and planks life-size in some paintings. You can imagine tossing broken boards aside or tearing a shin open on a nail.

Until Grade 9, it was a toss-up for the painter whether she would go into drama or visual art. "I still love lip-synching," she says with a smile, "anything performative. I feel these become performative and physical. They become more than a picture. They enliven memory and the body and the imagination."

Torrell, who grew up outside Toronto, is graduating in December and plans to stay in Halifax. She is teaching intro drawing at NSCAD after Christmas and getting a studio with some faculty members. Her experience at NSCAD, where she enrolled after studying art and English at McMaster University, has been "amazing," she says, "the most incredible group of interesting and intellectual people, so genuinely interested in art making, just really honest."

Where the pink house stood, there is now only a path. That doesn't make Torrell sad.

"I don't want to pay too much reverence to a place that was probably necessarily taken down. Though it speaks to me, it was also a massive fire hazard and a danger."

Her paintings are, however, monumental in size.

"I wanted it to be remembered before it was forgotten. Places are so transient now. What are we leaving behind? Where does all this stuff go?"

The paintings, she says are "sort of joyous and terrorizing at the same time."

The Pink Room is at Anna Leonowens Gallery, 1891 Granville St., to Dec. 10. The gallery is open 11 to 5 Tuesday to Friday, noon to 4 Sunday.

Landscape painter Gordon MacDonald is at Argyle Fine Art, 1869 Upper Water St., Historic Properties, today, 1:30 to 3:30 p.m., to meet with the public. MacDonald's work is on exhibit at Argyle Fine Art, currently running its 12 Days of Christmas program of events and discounts.

The schedule includes featured artwork by David Lacey on Dec. 7 and artists Alan Bateman and Tom Forrestall in the gallery on Dec. 10.

The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia is celebrating the Roar of the Rings with a small exhibit of historical prints that depict curling.

The exhibit, drawn from the gallery's works on paper collection, is on view to Dec. 11. Fans attending the Roar of the Rings Olympic curling trials can show their ticket stub for a 20 per cent discount on admission to the gallery.

During his Halifax posting with the King's Own Royal Regiment over the winter of 1867/1868, Lieutenant Henry Buckton Laurence took his sketch book to winter sporting events and later arranged to have his drawings printed as lithographs.

His picture of a curling match on the Dartmouth lakes has acquired a certain notoriety because of the hockey game taking place in the background. This is believed to be the earliest image of hockey being played.

This discount also applies to the blockbuster exhibition *Art of the Ancient Mediterranean World*.

The gallery is open everyday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursdays to 9 p.m.

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