



Lewis & Taggart

The Museum of Bow

Objects for Honouring Bow River Lore

For six days in July, a unique fountain greeted people in a busy pedestrian area near Calgary's downtown riverfront. It stood outside a camping trailer in which an unusual collection of artifacts known as *The Museum of Bow* had taken up temporary residence. The trickling water was inviting on those hot summer days, but the fountain presented other reasons for pause. Its main feature, a plaid flannel shirt, was not out of place in the context of a camper, however here the shirt was not hung to dry. Quite the opposite, it was being continuously soaked as Bow River water cycled through it. Named *Baptism for a New Frontier*, the fountain stood as a witty and endearing sculptural tribute to early paddlers of the Bow whose stories attest to numerous unintentional river baths. It also whimsically invited viewers to imagine a new way of keeping the Bow close — literally. *Baptism*, and the *Museum's* entire collection, was created by interdisciplinary collaborative artists Chloe Lewis and Andrew Taggart, collectively known as Lewis & Taggart.

As residents of TRUCK Gallery's CAMPER program,¹ Lewis & Taggart used a 1975 recreational vehicle as their base for travelling artistic activities. They are Canadians living in Norway and they brought both insiders' and outsiders' perspectives to their exploration of the Bow River. During their first week, Lewis & Taggart pored over documents at the Glenbow Archives and the local history section of the Calgary Public Library. They discovered the bold undertakings of

figures such as lumber baron Peter Prince and adventurer R.M. Patterson. They read Bow River-focused writings by the luminary Rudyard Kipling and by the local Amelia Bannister, whose unpublished novel featured the Bow as both a setting and a personified presence. They found historical images of artists, canoeists, glaciers and horses, all linked in some way to our river. The artists gravitated toward lesser known stories that demonstrated the interconnection between people and the Bow. They focused on accounts rich in visual imagery with potential for sculptural interpretation.

Alongside their historical research, Lewis & Taggart scoured the Bow's banks on foot and bicycle, collecting items they would transform into artifacts to illustrate their found stories. They selected all manner of urban refuse including an inflatable raft, a bicycle helmet and cigarette packages. Wood, feathers and other natural items augmented the haul. Casually found yet precisely used, these castoffs were manipulated to illustrate figurative, poignant, humorous and often ironic ideas about the river and our evolving relationship with it. The small sculptures *Shoot the Weir No. 1* and *No. 2* are exemplary companion pieces. In them, cutout two-dimensional archival images of men paddling canoes sit atop horizontal grounds of found parking tickets — one crumpled and pink, the other smooth and blue. The contrast of past and present lifestyles and attitudes is embraced in this diptych that juxtaposes self-determined,



▲ The artists work outdoors at Edworthy Park.



▲ Found sculptural elements are jointly considered.



▲ Water drips from the sculpture called
BAPTISM FOR A NEW FRONTIER.



▲ Chloe Lewis builds the papier-mâché foundation for KIPLING DEVICE.



▲ Lewis & Taggart work together on all aspects of a project.



▲ The artists' hands layer newspaper over a found bicycle helmet.



KIPLING DEVICE (FOR NEVER LETTING THE RIVER OUT OF YOUR SIGHT) ►

risk-riddled journeys of an earlier era against evidence of the ubiquitous rules that regulate modern transportation. In the same graceful gesture the artists draw attention to the ongoing dangers of Calgary's weir. Like the parking tickets, the historical accounts featured in *The Museum of Bow* have been revived in a playful context where the visual and the narrative converge as equals.

Lewis & Taggart specialize in collaboration. They jointly completed their Masters of Art² in this subject after marrying in 2008. The nature of their art practice is steeped in their dedication to collaborative processes. Typically, the artists develop a constellation of starting points based on set parameters — in this case the theme of the Bow River and the goals of CAMPER.³ The plurality implicit in this method allows each artist to contribute according to personal strengths and interests. However all contributions are handled co-operatively and no individual ownership of ideas or objects is ascribed. The multiplicity of thoughts, skills and approaches manifests a third, distinct voice that guides the process.⁴ The artists work together on all aspects of everything with no prescribed division of labour. Their two pairs of hands worked simultaneously on the same sculpture with neither taking charge. They even partnered on single drawings. In similar egalitarian fashion, all parts of the project — from measuring the camper's interior to creating artwork — are seen as aspects of the same multifaceted piece and are treated with equal importance.

To create the *Museum* the artists maintained a lively pace. In just 21 days they proceeded from research stage to exhibition closing. In that time they completed 24 objects, 16 works on paper, a small image-based publication, and delivered a six-day exhibition complemented by public interpretation. Working in the camper without the usual gallery amenities at their

fingertips was a challenge that the artists met resourcefully. The end result, while grounded in professional practices, retained an intentional grassroots feel.

To create an appropriate cabinet for their collection of curiosities, Lewis & Taggart lined the living space of the camper with large sheets of corrugated cardboard. The result was a slick but earthy, slightly shrunken, visually neutral interior. The exterior however remained that of a functional, well-used recreational vehicle. Lewis & Taggart appreciated the dichotomy. The folksy facade embodied the universal appeal of travel and acted as an accessible entry point for the imaginative content within. The dynamic inside/outside tension cajoled viewers into letting fantasy usurp believability. Not entirely sure what to expect, we entered with curiosity in hand.

Kipling Device (for never letting the river out of your sight) embodies this tension. In reference to his 1907 Alberta visit, Rudyard Kipling's memoirs reveal his fascination with the Bow's unusual colours, particularly the greens. In homage, Lewis & Taggart fashioned a papier-mâché model of Bow Glacier, the river's source, upon a found bicycle helmet. They dangled a cerulean blue paint chip from a clothespin on the end of a branch protruding from the icy hat. Additional paint chips⁵ in assorted blues and greens were filed on an accompanying notched stick. The work's outlandish physicality combined with its whimsical intent had an interesting effect on viewers. Many were moved to imagine strapping on the helmet and clipping up a colour chip. This is what the artists refer to as 'performative sculpture' and it is manifest in other works such as the aforementioned fountain. A visceral connection is a powerful way to engage with art. It is more powerful, the artists believe, than physically interacting with the work because imagination links the experience more deeply in our consciousness.⁶

A variety of works on paper were neatly pinned to the camper's interior cardboard walls. Some demonstrated the artists' considerable drawing skills while others featured modified archival reproductions. One in the latter category references the progression of art movements in a thought-provoking, anachronistic work entitled *Prediction*. An altered photograph shows a landscape artist working en plein air circa 1930. The scene evolving on his canvas has been replaced by a flat green plane, giving us a glimpse of Colour Field abstract painting⁷ that would not emerge for another decade or two. One of the more intellectually playful works in the collection, it conjures up a rhetorical question: could this thirties-era artist or his contemporaries have envisioned art the likes of *The Museum of Bow*? It seems improbable, but stranger things happen in the world of Lewis & Taggart.

As they reworked history and objects, the artists similarly re-imagined the very construct of museums. Using a direct approach, Lewis & Taggart bypassed the multiple levels of intervention involved in conventional institutions and reclaimed the idea of the museum on a personal level. They undertook research, care of objects, curatorial processes, installation and public programming with integrity. Their training and skills are clearly evident in the multi-layered sophistication of their artworks and the expertise with which they engaged in the above disciplines. But the content of the work makes it clear that the artists also invite spontaneity and are motivated by a desire to connect with others, past and present, through story. Lewis & Taggart's practice explores poetic and sculptural truths hidden beneath the facts, truths that are exposed when humour and imagination do the digging. The work both honours collecting and questions its assumed veracity. *The Museum of Bow* demonstrates that collections recruit the imagination; collections

allow past and present to coexist; collections ultimately reveal the character of the collector. By inventing their own collection about our river, Lewis & Taggart validate an alternative way to connect with our past — through personal association.

While the *Museum* was on public display, the artists took turns in the role of docent and shared their re-imagined stories with everyone who entered. Children were particularly enchanted by a sculpture called *The Hawksworth Solution (Device for turning sewage into cash)*, intrigued that the Queen's eye on a genuine \$20 bill stared back at them.⁸ A long-time Calgarian was surprised to learn that a lumberman actually used dynamite to enhance the flow of log booms down the Bow.⁹ The blast turned a peninsula into an island that was later named after the perpetrator. This historical calamity is aptly 'honoured' in *Three Strikes for Peter Prince*, a matchbook containing a humble trio of battered matches. Another visitor noted that while the river is an unchanging part of our local history, Lewis & Taggart's collection illustrates how we constantly re-shape our relationship with it based on our needs.¹⁰

For diverse Calgarians, *The Museum of Bow* presented an opportunity to become immersed in the long tradition of Bow River storytelling. For many of us, it brought realization that we take much about our river for granted. Lewis & Taggart's example shows us that even the obscure stories are worthy of tribute. Upon entering the artists' world, we are invited to embrace the absurd alongside the didactic and recognize that our history is shaped from such conundrums. The stories we remember will not always be purely factual but they will be ones that reveal who we are.

THE MUSEUM OF BOW takes up residence in TRUCK Gallery's R.V. ►





▲ Sheets of cardboard are cut to line the camper's interior.



▲ The artists create a visually neutral space for their collection.



▲ Chloe Lewis and Andrew Taggart



▲ The artists complete DEVICE FOR TURNING WHISKY INTO WATER.



▲ Installation view with SHOOT THE WEIR NO. 1 and NO. 2 in foreground.



▲ HORSE STILTS FOR RIVER CROSSING whimsically alters an archival image.



▲ KIPLING DEVICE's colour chips keep river hues close at hand.



▲ Installation view showing PREDICTION at right.

Endnotes:

- 1 CAMPER is an acronym for *Contemporary Art Mobile Public Exhibition Rig*. For more information on the CAMPER program, see the Introduction.
- 2 Norway Academy of the Arts, Bergen, Norway, 2010. Each artist wrote an individual thesis and each received a Masters degree but all of their studio work was made together.
- 3 CAMPER is a vehicle for artistic exploration and public engagement with art that is both accessible and inclusive. Source: www.truck.ca/?maj=12camper&min=0camper.
- 4 Lewis & Taggart, conversation with the author, Calgary, July 23, 2010.
- 5 The paint chips bear the Disney Color logo, perhaps a reference to the 1967 animated Disney film based on Kipling's *Jungle Book*.
- 6 Lewis & Taggart conversation, July 23, 2010.
- 7 Colour Field is a style of abstract painting that emerged in the 1940s and '50s characterized by large areas of solid colour and a lack of figurative representation.
- 8 Anonymous day camp participants in conversation with the author, Calgary, July 26, 2010.
- 9 Anonymous visitor in conversation with the author, Calgary, July 26, 2010.
- 10 Anonymous visitor in conversation with the author, Calgary, July 26, 2010.