



Building *a* work of art

PAINTINGS GO 3-D IN DETAILED 'WOOD ASSEMBLAGES'

By Barbara Aggerholm

THERE'S A TINY red door ajar on the rooftop of the rickety old building whose small, three-dimensional form is taking shape in the studio of artist Heather Kocsis.

In this studio, located in an industrial building in Cambridge, Kocsis is creating a miniature urban industrial landscape from another time.

She wears earplugs to block out the squeal coming from the adjoining machine

shop as she rips apart scraps of weathered plywood, then layers them on the frame, building – from background to foreground – the recesses, hidden entrances and corners of historic buildings.

Finally, using oil paints, she paints the textured surfaces in a way that suggests sun and shadow, weather and time on a factory's face.

The result is a three-dimensional representation of a building that Kocsis calls "wood assemblage."

Heather Kocsis creates multi-dimensional art in her Cambridge studio (right). City of Spirit (above) is just one example of how her buildings lift from the wall in detail after detail.

Her pieces "possess the subject matter of photojournalism, the compositions of paintings, and the tactile quality of sculpture," local artist and newspaper columnist Marshall Ward has said in a review.

Standing in front of Kocsis' alleyways, abandoned factories, blocks of time-worn storefronts and winding fire escapes, one feels a bit like Gulliver on his travels in Lilliput.

Except there are no little people opening the red door, leaning against the chipped ▶



Photography • Tom Vogel



► brickwork or painting graffiti on the wall. For good reason, Kocsis says. It wouldn't be *your* story if she added people to the piece.

"I want the viewer to create their own story," she says. "The little red door open invites the viewer in. People notice the detail. I have people say, 'I want to go inside.'"

Kocsis, 35, wants you to appreciate the history of old industrial buildings, recall the time when they were bustling with workers carrying lunch buckets or punching time clocks. But she's not a preservationist, and she's not a model maker.

She's an artist who interprets the character of buildings, first photographing them to help her decide the composition and angle.

"I'm trying to draw attention to buildings in danger of being torn down that have a history and a life in them," she says one day at her studio while preparing for a show in Toronto.

A quote on her website explains: "Bound inside their walls are the stories of the people of these communities – the dreams of fathers and mothers, newly arrived immigrants, women who replaced men on the assembly lines during the war, the visions of emerging entrepreneurs."

"All of these stories become the identity of that area."

Kocsis is inspired by urban activist and writer Jane Jacobs.

A quotation from Jacobs, who died at age 89 in Toronto, is on her website: "Even if we go into darkness, the time will come when people will want to know how these ruins were made – the essence of life we made," said Jacobs, who wrote the book, *The Death and Life of Great*

UP AND AWAY

The staircase in Heather Kocsis' artwork *There Is a Story on Every Level*, carries viewers upward, inviting them inside. The piece is designed to hang in a corner.

Photography • Tom Vogel

American Cities.

Reading the quote out loud makes Kocsis emotional.

"Jane Jacobs is important to me," she says. "She stood for community, and she stood for history and substance."

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Kocsis is where she wants to be right now, working 60 hours a week on her art – four to six weeks on one piece – doing private commissions, visiting galleries and preparing for exhibitions, including a solo show Dec. 2 to 23 at the Paula White Diamond Gallery in the Bauer Marketplace in Waterloo.

She'd like to be better known, but she's optimistic that will come.

In her studio, where jagged piles of plywood are stacked against the walls, she's surrounded by finished pieces and works in progress, including one of the former Lang Tannery building in downtown Kitchener.

She managed to capture the essence of Yankee Stadium and the Revere Sugar Refinery in Brooklyn before the two buildings were demolished.

Ten years ago, Kocsis had a very successful show at KOR Gallery in Kitchener when all of the buildings she had created – 14 in total – were bought by Toronto actuary Peter Lerner. She had depicted a series of warehouses and factories in Kitchener and Waterloo, some vacant, some scheduled to be torn down, a few heading for condo conversions.

There were representations of Kaufman Footwear, the Arrow shirt factory, the Forsyth factory, Rumpel Felt Co., Huck Glove, to name a few.

The sale was a huge boost for a young artist who was developing a new technique after having specialized in printmaking at Queen's University in Kingston.

"It made me further believe in my work. It generated commissions, and I was a successful self-employed artist in Kitchener-Waterloo," she says.

Lerner, a University of Waterloo grad-



This photograph shows some of the detail on Heather Kocsis' *Overlooking the Significance of Passageways*.
Photography • Tom Vogel

uate who runs a reinsurance risk-management company in Toronto, placed her art on display at Kitchener City Hall where it remains today.

He was struck by the uniqueness of Kocsis' style and "the sheer cleverness" of the concept.

"I get the same feeling of awe walking back from one of Heather's works and watching the components transform into a work of art with depth as I do from seeing the same effect in the masterpieces of the great Impressionists," he says.

"I thought, 'She'll be a star.'"

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Kocsis grew up in Cambridge, attending Southwood Secondary School where she excelled in art, particularly woodcuts.

At Queen's University, she specialized in printmaking, and explored how she could create more depth in her prints by juxtaposing different techniques like silk screening and lithography.

She was interested in the technical challenge of layering the methods, and focused on portraying nostalgic memories of growing up with her older sister, now a lawyer in London.

She ruled out graduate work in art conservation when she realized chemistry and other sciences were not her passion.

Graduating after four years with an honours bachelor of fine arts, Kocsis was surprised when a professor offered to pay for a three-month residency at Engramme print studio in Quebec City.

The experience stretched her, artistically and culturally. Afterward, she moved back to Cambridge, working for a short time at her family's golf course while she saved for a studio and equipment.

Then, as a printmaker-in-residence at KOR Gallery, she was asked to do a creative investigation of downtown Kitchener. She had found her muse.

The buildings, which heralded an industrial past, fascinated her while she wandered and took photographs.

"I was really interested in the textures of the buildings from a print-making aspect," she says.

Later, at a rented studio she'd found in downtown Kitchener, she was working on a painting, using a piece of weathered wood as an easel, when she had an idea. Her photos of Hall's Lane, all angles and shadows, were nearby. ►

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At left, Heather Kocsis displays an example of her original wood material next to finished work. Above, is a portion of a piece called Lang Tanning Transitional. Photography • Tom Vogel

► “I took apart the wood and reconstructed the photo using the pieces of wood,” she says.

It was her first “wood assemblage,” a “eureka moment,” Kocsis says. “I thought, ‘I really have something here.’”

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Since then, Kocsis has wandered around Kitchener, Cambridge, Chicago and New York, taking photographs of buildings to get a sense of the cities’ architecture.

“I like to create my own composition rather than be given photos.”

She has been to New York five times, walking in all five boroughs with a book, *Forgotten New York*, to help give her a sense of their industrial heritage. “I want to do a collection of New York’s industrial past.”

Currently, she’s “reinvestigating” some of Kitchener’s factories – hence the Lang Tanning piece that is taking shape in her studio – for the December show in Waterloo.

“It will show the evolution of my work and the evolution of downtown Kitchener

at the same time,” she says.

She continues to take photos, decide the composition, build a frame that will contain the piece. She paints the plywood with primer, then transfers a grid onto the wood so she can draw according to scale.

Using a small Black and Decker saw, she cuts and tears the wood, piecing the bits together according to their texture, starting with the background as she makes tiny rooms, hallways, doors, alleys and fire escapes. Choosing the wood is an important part of the process.

Using industrial glue, screws and nails to attach the wood pieces, she can’t afford to make a mistake. Then she paints the artwork, paying careful attention to every crack in a wall, the tiny graffiti on brick work, the scratches on a water tower. Wire helps reinforce features such as the winding fire escape in a piece called 43 Steps.

Prices range from \$700 for a smaller piece to about \$8,500.

A recent piece – a six-foot-long Brooklyn streetscape called *City of Spirit* – incorporates some drawing to give an idea of the

draftsmanship.

Kocsis also does private commissions featuring people’s homes or country estates, theatres or churches. She’s working with a structural engineering firm, translating a cross-section of property underground and above ground.

She plans to feature other communities’ historic buildings, just as she has done in Kitchener. One day, her dream is to work in Italy, with its “history and energy and beauty.”

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Nowhere was her creativity, imagination, and most definitely, her persistence more evident than during a trip to New York in 2008.

She went with the intention of recreating Yankee Stadium, built in 1923, which was slated for demolition. She wanted to give the piece to late night talk show host David Letterman, thereby calling attention to the building’s history and her art at the same time.

After making the piece, Kocsis hired a marketing team, made 50 press kits and

contacted Letterman’s offices, the presidents of the five boroughs, mayor of New York, and George Steinbrenner, owner of the New York Yankees, now deceased.

Then she made the rounds in New York, knocking on doors and doing media interviews while she waited to hear from Letterman’s people. Finally, she got a “nice email” that indicated her work was appreciated, but Letterman couldn’t accept it.

“I was devastated,” she says. But not defeated. Next morning, she hauled her Yankee Stadium to CBS where she waited in line to catch an interview with the weatherman on the early morning show. She got on national television. Later, she snagged the attention of television personality Regis Philbin, hoping for another interview. No dice, but she and her mom did get tickets to his show.

She took her piece to the real Yankee Stadium ballpark to show people there. “It drew a lot of attention. People thought it was amazing,” she says, smiling at the memory.

The historic ballpark was demolished earlier this year. Kocsis’ representation of Yankee Stadium is now in Wellington Gallery in Aurora.

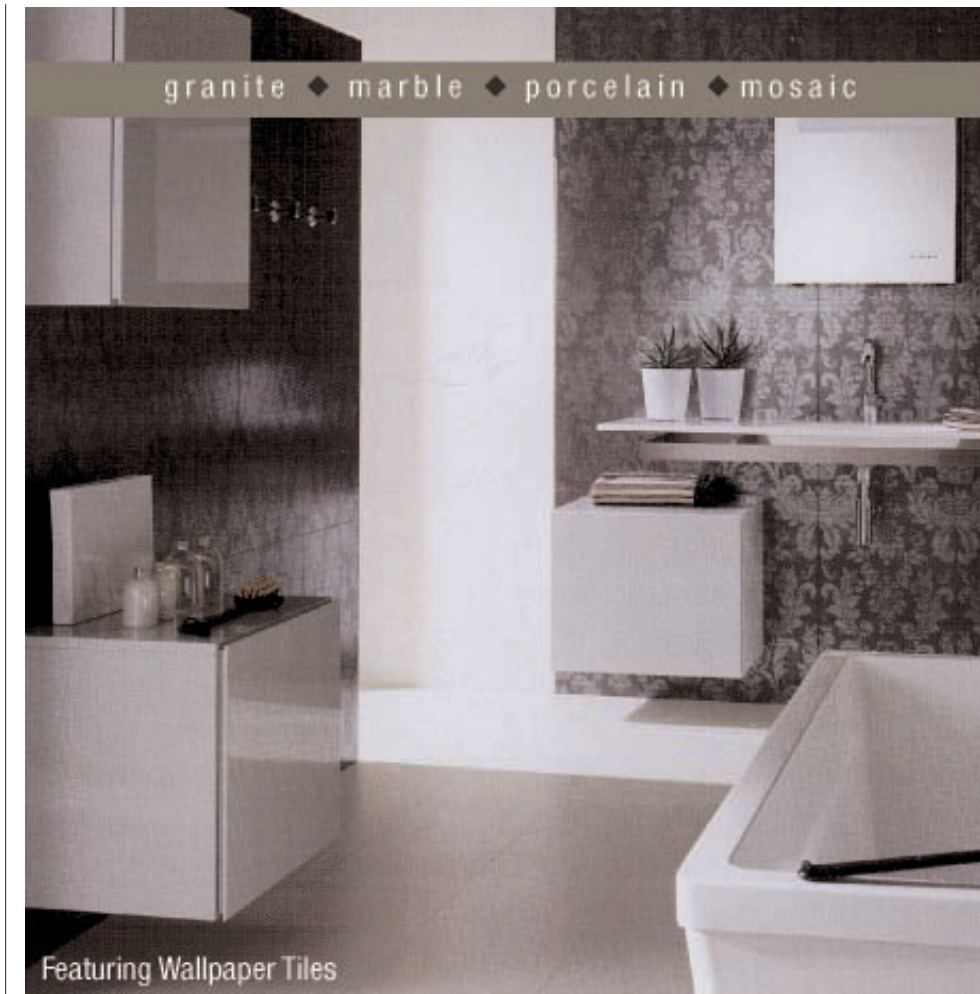
But its story isn’t finished, she says, adding she’s trying to get a piece of wood from the former stadium that she might incorporate into the artwork.

She isn’t by nature the kind of person you might expect to walk around New York waiting for Letterman to call.

“Do I seem like an extrovert?” she says, laughing. “People say I’m quite reserved. I don’t talk for the sake of talking.”

But “I believe in my work and I believe that if you have faith and perseverance, everything is possible.... I feel that I’m just getting started with even better work.”

On the web: www.heatherkocsis.com
Heather Kocsis is represented by Paula White Diamond Gallery and Design Studio in Waterloo; Petroff Gallery in Toronto; Village Gallery in Port Credit; and the Ariana Gallery in Michigan.



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