



City of Spirit, oil on plywood, graphite drawing, 15" x 72" x 7"



The Need for Old Buildings, oil on plywood, 48" x 41" x 6"

Go Big, or Go Home

written by Debra Usher

The Big Apple, New York City, is about as big as it gets. And Kocsis' three-dimensional technique is as big in spatial depth and imagination as it can get. While she continues her artistic relationship with NYC, her roots are really in Ontario, beginning with her birth in Hamilton in 1974.

Born to a secondary school biology teacher dad and a nurse mother, the family – including her two-and-a-half year older sister – moved to Ancaster for middle school and at the age of thirteen, to Cambridge, where her parents, along with her aunt and uncle, had an opportunity to buy a golf course. Heather worked at the golf course during her high school years until she moved to Kingston in 1993 to pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree at Queen's University.

As she indicates, "I chose Queen's University due to the art program's reputation as well as the fact none of my relatives had gone there and I could make it part of my lineage. Also because it had an arts conservation program and my intention was to pursue this direction as a viable career in case my father challenged my choice of the undergraduate program. He did not."

Heather's years at Queen's (1993-1997) were

very rewarding and enriching, starting in the first year with a small program where the professors encouraged expression rather than tight control of technique. Delving into her work, she spent 12-14 hours a day at the studio. The second year found her taking an intense year-long art history course condensed into one month, in Venice, Italy. "Venice was energizing, fascinating and completely awe-inspiring," she reflects. "Since I saw the beauty man was capable of building... we also visited Florence. Architecture had not influenced my artwork at that time."

During Kocsis' third year, she needed to make a decision regarding the graduate program for art conservation and decided she did not want to dedicate her life to restoring other people's work, but rather do her own work, create her own expression. Printmaking became her specialty in her fourth year, with Professor J.C. Heywood as her advisor. Combining several different techniques – photo plates, lithography, etching and screenprinting – into one composition, each print in an edition would be different from the other. She enjoyed the layering process and the technical aspect of printmaking which would influence her current art-making process.

Heather graduated from Queen's in 1997 and



Overlooking the Significance of Passageways,
oil on plywood, 38" x 40" x 8"

received the Award for Printmaking. Although she pondered a Masters Degree, she decided not to immediately pursue it, feeling she needed to experience life and acquire more knowledge in order to have something significant to say through a Masters thesis of Fine Art.

Through the personal sponsorship of J.C. Heywood, Kocsis then attended a printmaking residency at the printshop Engramme, in Quebec City, for the summer. Spending three months in Quebec was "challenging and enriching," and she produced an edition of prints expanding on her thesis from her fourth year at Queen's.

Shortly after returning to Cambridge, Heather participated with other emerging artists to create a gallery and multi-disciplinary studio space in Kitchener-Waterloo that came to be known as KOR Gallery and Studios (Kitchener's Own Renaissance), under the vision of Deborah Rothwell, an established artist and prominent

member of the community. As well as being the Printmaker in Residence, Heather also installed gallery exhibitions, organized opening receptions, performed outreach tasks within the community, operated the framing studio, and taught printmaking workshops. In addition to the task of creating the facility, the young artists were individually assigned to embark on a "creative investigation of downtown Kitchener," where Kocsis was drawn to the textures and colours of the worn facades of 19th century factories in the area. The creative project manifested itself into an exhibition at Kitchener City Hall in May, 1999.

It was at that time in her studio that Heather noticed a weathered piece of plywood lying on the floor that she had used as a support board for her drawings. Recognizing the similarity between the grain of the wood to the texture of a building she had photographed, she started to rip apart the plywood and reconstruct the photograph.



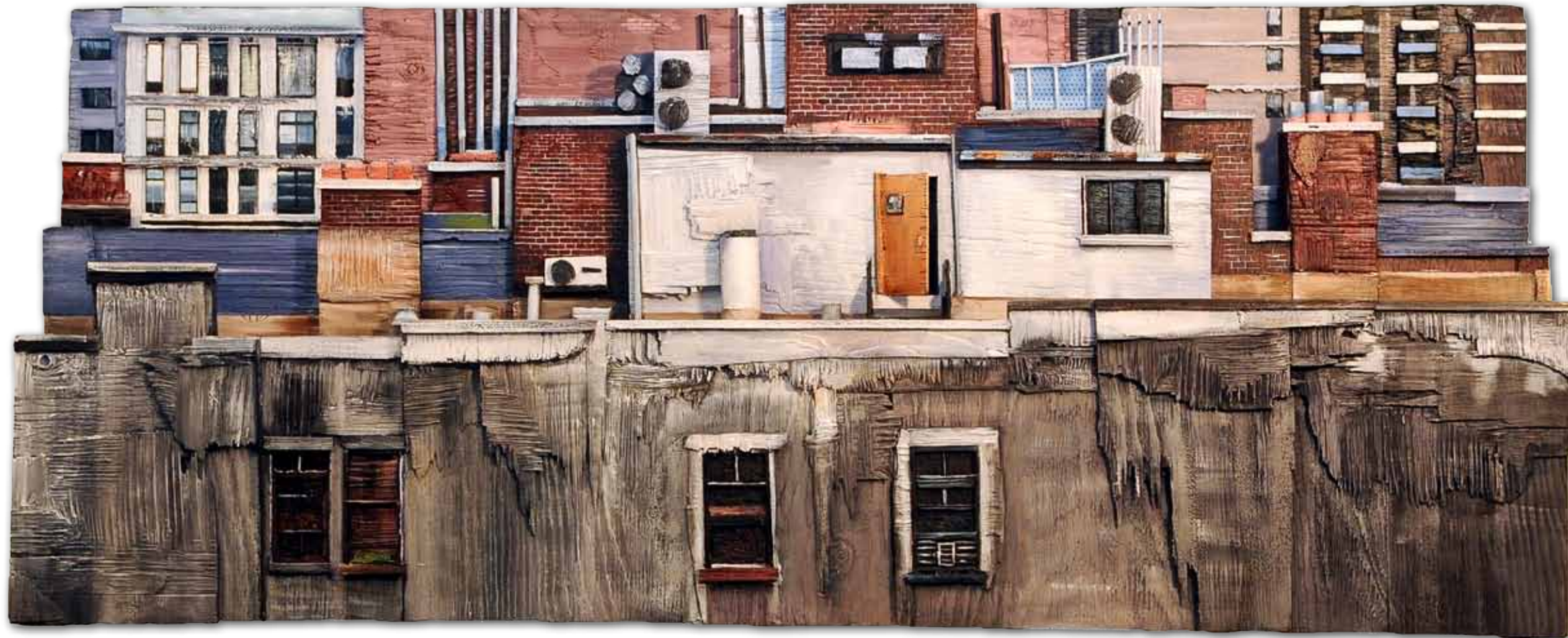
What Do You Know?, oil on plywood, 30" x 38" x 7"

After applying some paint, this first piece was very raw looking, yet she knew she had done something special. Introducing the new wood technique at the City Hall show, she sold several pieces and realized the possibility of this new style.

Heather had to create a name for the process, referring to it as "wood assemblages", since no other similar work existed. Kocsis layers weathered wood to create three-dimensional representations of architecture. Her work has been described as "possess[ing] the subject matter of photojournalism, the compositions of paintings, and the tactile quality of sculpture" (Marshall Ward, "Kocsis' Back Alley Blues," *Echo Newsweekly*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 10 October 2002).

In 2001, Heather had a solo exhibition of fourteen works depicting Kitchener-Waterloo turn-of-the-century factories in this innovative wood technique. Deborah Rothwell had

promoted the exhibition to the City of Kitchener, the owners of the factories, as well as a Toronto collector who supported and admired her work. On the eve of the show's opening, the Toronto collector purchased the entire collection. Not having the space to house the collection, he made arrangements for the works to be on public display at Kitchener City Hall for an indefinite time. After the success of that show, Kocsis moved to Kitchener and worked at KOR, teaching workshops and fulfilling numerous private commissions. After seeing such a strong, positive response to her work she decided to exhibit at other shows, including the Toronto Outdoor Show at City Hall's Nathan Phillips Square. The first show found Sara Petroff, owner of the Petroff Gallery, in Toronto, admiring the wood assemblages and desiring to represent Heather, which continues to this day. Representation by the Harbinger Gallery in Waterloo soon followed.



The Places Where We Live, oil on plywood, 21" x 48 1/2" x 6"



King Street Alley, oil on plywood, 32 1/2" x 18 1/2" x 4 1/2"



Bauer's Past, oil on plywood, 10" x 43" x 3 1/2"

In the fall of 2006, Heather set off for a two-week visit to New York City to research NYC's industrial heritage. Travelling through all five boroughs, her companions were a digital camera and the book, "Forgotten New York" by Kevin Walsh as her guide. Two thousand photos later, she returned to Ontario and was introduced to Jane Jacobs' philosophies and books, immediately devouring "The Life and Death of Great American Cities", which pulled together her concept of the significance of old buildings. This reinforced her commitment to continually improve her technique, leading to constructing more difficult structures, embellishing colour, and creating more dynamic pieces.

Heather acquired a Cambridge studio space in 2007 and began a body of work depicting her New York images. Shows in Toronto, Chicago and New York followed. While in NYC to promote her work, Heather was interviewed on the CBS Early Morning Show, and one NYC reporter used her classic piece, "Yankee Stadium" in an article on his website to increase awareness to prevent the demolition of the beloved historical stadium which had been in existence since 1923.

This tied in strongly with Heather's "preservation of older buildings" theme, and she was able to apply this belief to a real-time situation of saving the "House that Babe Ruth Built", and positively affect numerous people with her work through this campaign.

During 2009 and 2010, Kocsis participated in several shows in North America, which generated corporate and private commissions. Every new piece challenged her to create a better work and in December 2010, Heather produced fourteen new pieces for a solo show in Waterloo, ON. As her technique develops, her pieces are becoming more abstract, concerning the architectural elements, and concentrating on light, colour, and shape.

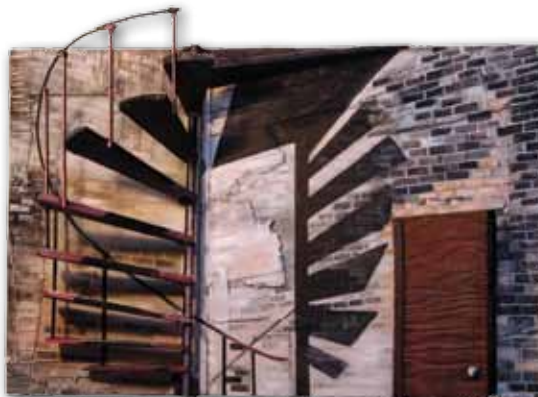
Heather's private studio fulfills her needs very well, being in front of a machine shop with access to a large bay door. "I work with power tools to cut the wood and use oil paint as well. I have three separate rooms, one for the woodworking, one for an office space and the other for storage. I enjoy the privacy and security of the space. I found it perfect when it first came to me, being in an industrial building. I have contemplated using steel, but I will concentrate with wood for the moment."



Krug History, oil on plywood, 24" x 22 1/2" x 4"



Looking Out and Going Somewhere, oil on plywood, 28" x 20" x 8"



Leave the Light On..., oil on plywood, 23 1/2" x 36 1/2" x 9"



Every Level Has a Story, oil on plywood, 36" x 8" x 7"

There's no doubt that her craft is unique, and when asked about the process, Kocsis states, "To the best of my knowledge, no other artist does the kind of work I do. I have been working on this technique for 10 years whereby I have evolved the process insofar as it has become inherent which piece of wood I choose to create the specific texture." When asked what advice she would give people who are just starting to explore her craft, she responds: "I tell people it would take a lot of time, patience and creativity to create their own unique piece. They need to follow their inspiration and be kind to themselves."

"Originally, when I created pieces based on specific urban themes, I would take a photographic essay of the area. When I first went to Chicago, I intentionally stayed on the outskirts of the city. Therefore, when I entered the city by way of the L-train, I would get a sense of the city.

I would then find a building or area that is rich in history or indicative of the community's identity. I visually investigate the area from different angles, looking for interesting perspectives. Later, I sort through my photos and choose a segment of the photo I think would create a visually compelling composition, would be possibly challenging to build, as well as possessing an assortment of surfaces for me to play with the texture. Then, using reclaimed wood, I build from the background to the foreground, layering the pieces. My experience with printmaking and the desire to layer a composition to create a work complete with texture lends itself well to this process. I then prime and paint the wood to create a sculptural painting. Currently I am more interested in architectural elements than an entire building. I am interested in taking the work to the next level by creating more artistic, sculptural works, which will invite the viewer into the piece."

On a personal level, Kocsis enjoys going for day trips, experiencing cultural events, and enjoying nature. She enjoys fresh, seasonal vegetables with delicate herbs, and seared ahi tuna steak, followed by Haagen Daaz Vanilla Swiss Almond Ice Cream. Her current wine choice is 2008 Hecula Monastrell. The one place you would never find her: attending or watching an Ultimate Fighting Championship event! You can view Heather's work at www.heatherkocsis.com.