

*The Survivor Monument Project*

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[See table of contents](#)

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## The Survivor Monument Project

DEBBIE O'ROURKE

Little more than a decade ago, sexual abuse of children was the unspeakable crime. To talk about it openly is still to release the skeleton in the family closet, lift the lid off a cultural Pandora's box.

To raise one's voice is to challenge the father, the teacher, the priest. We all feel that tightening of the throat. That is only one of many reasons why, when sculptor and psychotherapist Michael Irving first began speaking about his idea in 1991, it was difficult to see how one could handle this subject in a monument. The intrinsic painfulness of the subject matter, the sexual content, the logistics involved in gaining the survivors' participation, the pervasive nature of a social problem that can create invisible roadblocks wherever one turns for support, the need for confidentiality and security, all pose apparently insurmountable barriers.

Yet Irving, a former child prostitute who struggled from adult illiteracy to a PhD in psychology and art, persisted. With the help of Sylvia Fraser, the Canadian author whose book, *My Father's House*, helped break the silence on this issue, he began to assemble a Circle of Friends of the

project. From consultations with fellow clinicians and social organizations before the artwork commenced to tours that took survivors' art and poetry to public spaces across the country, the artwork grew hand in hand with the social agenda. Community support has been warm and broad-based. The project survives year to year largely on volunteer labour and private contributions, including over a million dollars of in-kind donations. The largely unpaid labour of the Irving family, including Michael, his wife Cheryl (also a psychotherapist), and her father Al Clint, has sustained the concept over its many years of development. From the Irvings' home, operations have moved to an industrial space donated by the Toronto Association for Community Living.

The heart of the complex project is a collection of over 180 ten-inch-square wax reliefs created by survivors and other persons affected by childhood sexual abuse. To give the process flexibility and to provide each survivor/artist with a space for personal expression, Irving opted for the classic quilt square concept — with a difference: the result was to be bronze, as permanent as anything humans can make, capable of withstanding

the elements in public outdoor space. The *Vietnam War Memorial* was an inspiration for the *Survivors Monument*, but privacy issues and continuing danger made it impossible to recognize many abuse survivors by name. So hand-prints were employed to identify participants and to serve as the base for their artwork. As the first step in the creation of the monument, each survivor/artist's hand was cast in plaster.

With the initial participants, Irving developed a sculpture process that would be easy to teach to beginners and friendly to the efforts of untrained artists. The group found sculptor's wax to be an ideal medium in which to make a positive cast from the plaster impression: firm at room temperature but easily softened by handling; permanent, yet non-drying so the piece could be worked on over a period of weeks or even years. They discovered that when they removed the wax hand-print from its plaster mold, it appeared to reach out from the surface. This gave the monument its title. From 1996 until 2000, sculpture workshops were conducted in communities across the country. During a five-day workshop, survivor-artists added imagery and text to their hand-castings, often taking their squares away with them to work on over a period of months. Those who felt comfortable going public signed their squares.

The results of this huge donation of time and energy are riveting and often of startling originality. Sylvia Fraser created a diabolical image of a snake coiled up in an ice cream cone. At the other end of the emotional spectrum, tiny angels flutter about one of the hands like butterflies. Greg Angus, a painter who worked as a staff technician constructing the monument, referred to the collection as "one of the great gatherings of Outsider Art." It is not only the power of the subject matter that gives them their impact, but the richness of detail and conscien-

tious workmanship that went into each square.

This physicality was almost overwhelming for some survivors. Margaret Morris is one of those women who are the mainstay of so many community organizations: energetic, efficient, and connected. She also created one of the most subtly frightening images on the monument. In her quilt square, a little girl stands beneath an ancient-looking tree, like a cycad, all of its leaves or branches growing from a central point. One branch, large and limp, arches out from the trunk to dangle directly in front of the child's face. Though it barely differs from the other branches on the fan-shaped tree, its gesture and shape are unmistakably phallic.

In late 1999, assembly of the monument began. A Millennium grant provided the funding to hire a crew to make molds of the original "quilt" squares, cast them in a harder wax, and assemble them onto the two 11-by-16-foot figures that provide a structure for the quilts. As I write this, the first figure is at the bronze foundry and the second stands in the monument studio, waiting to be cast. The simple figure's arms are outstretched in a friendly, beckoning gesture: childlike in its proportions, maternal in its protectiveness. Though many ideas were considered, Irving had to deal with some pressing considerations with respect to the shape of the monument:

"If your intent with your artwork is to seek transformation, then lots of different things about what is art or what is transformation need to be thought about. I view the physical parameters of the bronze as only one component of the art. The art finds its way into media . . . and the art finds itself on calendars and peoples T-shirts. The art is part of the conversation that exists in those realms. I think that part of having an impact is to ask: what kinds of activities can we do that extend

GREG ANGUS doing detail work on *Survivor Monument*. Photo: Alison Black.





## SARAH BECK: *Öde*

the viewing or the participatory audience of the artwork?" In order for the monument to fulfill its purpose of becoming a media symbol, the silhouette of the sculpture would need to function as a logo. Another pressing factor was the necessity for community input. Focus groups of survivors made suggestions during consultations in which they discussed Irving's miniature clay models, and approved the final proposal. They decided that the figure needed to have a positive, uplifting gesture, to ensure that the viewer would not be overwhelmed by the pain in many of the images.

This decision is validated by the expression of relief that floods the face of a person who enters the studio for the first time. Reassured by the friendliness of the monument, people slowly move in and soon become absorbed by the stories and craft of the quilt squares. They then discover that many squares are surprisingly positive: most survivors chose to create messages of hope. They called up scores of symbols to express their healing as well as their struggle. Small children scale cliffs and ropes. Dragons and wolves come to the rescue; eagles battle snakes. Seeds sprout, embryos grow, caterpillars transform, chains are broken. Angels abound.

Even with an apparent societal consensus on the importance of the issue of child abuse, and after years of effort have created a monument that is successful without being threatening or obscene, acquiring funding and finding a site have been problematic. Public policy has fallen behind changing ideas about the nature of public art. Selection processes for public sites in Toronto fail to recognize the growing field of community art. They contain no room for artist-generated works, and a community's role is limited to making a request. In the end, the Toronto Maple Leafs and the principals of the Air Canada Centre made the courageous step of offering their location as a permanent home. Irving is now trying to arrange a cross-country tour of the completed bronze figure, while it awaits preparation of its site.

The field of community art has given Irving a definition within which his practice can be recognized, but the fit is not always comfortable. Its definitions encourage practitioners to func-

tion more as facilitators and community organizers than as creators in their projects. There are pitfalls to this admirable process, for community artists often have no more training in organizational or therapeutic work than the groups they work with have in making art. The results are often ephemeral, something that would have been inappropriate for child abuse survivors. Irving points out that abused children are all-too-accustomed to seeing their efforts destroyed.

As both a trained psychotherapist and a working sculptor, Michael Irving has learned the necessity of drawing a clear line between the two functions. As an artist he resists the idea of not being an active creative participant in a project whose realization has required his unique blend of life experience, clinical and sculptural skills, and his daily ministrations over a period of years. As an organizer, he takes seriously his obligation to keep his promises and ensure the project's completion.

Both a clinician and a social activist artist, Irving intends this monument to be not only a symbolic gesture, but a real tool for change: "I think that you help victims not to become perpetrators, and there's a need to help victims to not be so inward and so wounded . . . And then society itself is wounded from hearing and seeing these stories and not having a chance to process them. That's called vicarious trauma. One way that works in psychological terms is called projective identification. That means there's something inside you that's hard to manage and to conceptualize: it's hard to work with and talk about. So you put it into something outside yourself: you put it into a story, or a myth; you can put it into an artwork."

As for the importance of this social recovery to society, I give the last word to Marque Brill: "If we can so deliberately ignore the abuse of children, who are the starting point of the formation of who we are as a society, then it is hard for me to imagine us, as a society, addressing the many other abuses I'm aware of." ←

Reaching Out:  
*The Survivor Monument Project*  
In progress, 1993-  
Toronto, Ontario

Less than ten days after Toronto artist Sarah Beck disassembled *Öde*, the irony implicit in her multi-media installation at Third Avenue Gallery became the reality of September 11, 2001. The centrepiece of *Öde* was a low-cost, environmentally-friendly, easily wiped-clean, full-size replica of a military tank.

Yet in spite of its immense volume, Beck's sculpture was a benign presence, merely filling the Vancouver gallery wall to wall, floor to ceiling, like a big toy some boy-giant might have left behind in the sandbox.

In the aftermath of 9/11, as previously unthinkable phrases such as "weaponized biological agents" and "homeland security" became the standard lingo of America's New War on terrorism (another new phrase), the amiable intention of *Öde* seemed less an artful parody of childish consumerist desires than a portent of a future suddenly arrived.

Conceptually, *Öde* is a pseudo-retail enterprise mimicking mass-marketing tactics that lull buyers into believing that consumer products will make their lives happier. Using the IKEA model of print and electronic merchandising to supplement retail sales, Beck produced hundreds of copies of a 32-page full-colour catalogue outlining the *Öde* vision; "a better everyday life through global militarization." Filled with cheery photographs of smiling children and

carefree young adults (tumbling on hay bales, blowing soap bubbles, fondling a kitten), the catalogue text confides that "most of the time well designed weapons are created for a small part of the population — the few who can afford them. From the beginning, *Öde* has taken a different path. We have decided to side with the many. That means responding to the armament needs of people throughout the world. . . people who want to improve their situation and create a better everyday life."

Proclaiming that "*Öde* cares!" the tongue-in-cheek publication shows white, middle-class families busily assembling their own military equipment using a step-by-step instruction guide and an Allen key. "It's so simple, one tool is all you'll need. . . we've thought of everything so you can focus on your dreams."

The dream in this instance is owning a 30-foot long, authentically modelled 1997 American Rooikot 105 armoured tank, identical to those used by South African military forces. The fact that it is constructed entirely of white plastic-coated particle board — and is inoperable as a weapon — is glossed over with seductive marketing ploys emphasizing the tank's contemporary styling, optional finishes, and the availability of co-ordinating accessories. Apparently, to paraphrase David Lee Roth, battle-readiness isn't dependent on "whether you win or lose, but how good you look."

The *Öde* website perpetuates the notion that security can be

SARAH BECK, *Öde*, 2001. Tank in driveway of home belonging to Beck's parents (Saskatchewan). Photo: courtesy of the artist.

