

Tor Lukasik-Foss: *See the Forest*

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It was English playwright William Shakespeare who gave the most elegant shape to one of the world's greatest metaphors: "All the world's a stage," begins a monologue in *As You Like It*, "and all the men and women merely players."

Hamilton-based artist Tor Lukasik-Foss has taken the metaphor to heart with this gallery-sized installation of sculptural works that, echoing ever so faintly of the work of the Bard, double as theatrical kinds of sets for the artist's performances. There are four separate pieces comprising the whole of the show, thematically related via core structural similarities: each is in the shape of a kind of partially enclosed booth into which a person can easily fit themselves, and each has a small, low platform—a disk, really—on which aforesaid person can stand, if sometimes unsteadily so, owing to some defects in Lukasik-Foss's construction methods.

The performative aspect of the installation was available only to the few who attended the gallery the evening it was staged; the artefactual aftermath is what the majority of us were presented with over the course of the exhibition. Initial responses to these pieces had to pertain to their materiality. Lukasik-Foss has, for the most part, employed what appears to be detritus to build these four things, bits and pieces of scavenged and weathered wood that includes, in the case of one work, large, broken chunks of highway signage from the Queen Elizabeth Way (QEW), the major traffic artery linking Toronto to the border crossing at Buffalo, New York. The latter bits stand out because of their highly reflective painted surfaces (which makes photographing them difficult), but mainly because only on them do we encounter fragments of what were (and to some degree still are) meaningful text and numbers.

But it's just the one piece in which Lukasik-Foss utilizes scavenged signage; the remaining three works are devoid of such intrusively

semantic elements, which of course makes the QEW work stand out all the more as the oddball, here. Intentionally or not, the eye heads to it first and so it consequently ends up dominating the companion works. It takes centre stage. It is the star of the show.

But this is all just superficial surface stuff—the proverbial distracting smoke and mirrors—for we aren't solely intended to view these works as a passive audience standing out front and merely looking on. Lukasik-Foss intends us to engage the works actively by physically entering into them, and that requires removing ourselves from seeing textual and numerical references that may or may not enter into the larger meaning of things, and moving around behind them in order to enter within the space of each work.

And so we step up and onto a small wobbly wooden disk set atop a small platform, and we face toward what would, in performative terms, be the front of the house from which we have entered the gallery space. But each of Lukasik-Foss's pieces denies us, to some degree or other, the ability to see from whence we came. We are not permitted a clear and unfettered view out and front. The QEW signage work, for example, utterly forbids such a thing; Lukasik-Foss's assemblage of chunks of wood totally screens out any semblance of a view from the waist up, while putting our lower body on view, unobstructed save for a series of vertically set metal tubes that attach the upper view-obstructing portion of the work to its base.

Another piece, stage left of the QEW work, affords us a bit of a view. Here, Lukasik-Foss encases us in something that remotely resembles a kind of cage composed of horizontal slats of wood with gaps between them, allowing us to see and be seen. But we're set in a position of peeking out, as if from behind a set of blinds. There is a surreptitious quality to the piece that could lead us to think we were

hiding in plain sight save for the fact that we are, once again, on full frontal view from the waist down.

Down stage right, a bit of the QEW sculpture is the one piece here that provides minimal exposure and maximal coverage. Largish chunks of weathered plywood are, here, assembled together with smaller bits of salvaged wood to form a long, thin shelter—open on one side to the rear—supported by a single metal post attached to the wooden base of the work. Inside it, our view on three sides is totally blocked; only our legs

from the knees down can be discerned from without. There's no peeking here, no eye hole to proffer a view forward or to the sides—only the openness at the back of the work from which we enter, and the blankness of the nearby wall behind us.

The adjacent work, extreme stage right, re-jigs the minimal/maximal seeing ratios. Again, weathered and beaten bits and pieces of plywood are assembled (in some cases, seemingly temporarily so courtesy of Lukasik-Foss's use of clamps in structurally holding the work together) to

Tor LUKASIK-FOSS,
See the Forest, 2009.
Installation detail.
Photo: Latcham Gallery.



again create a space of visual denial from within, but which simultaneously affords little shelter from the gaze of those without; anything below the waist is fair visual game.

Perhaps “game” is the right word. Perhaps by physically participating in these pieces, we’re essentially just playing around — recapitulating, say, the absurdity of a cartoon ostrich shoving its head into the ground in the erroneous belief that if it can’t see then it quite logically follows that it can’t be seen. We of course know the flaw in such an “if/then” thesis,

and yet standing within one of Lukasik-Foss’s sculptures our physiology tells us otherwise. Despite the theatricality of the installation, there’s a kind of phenomenological sense of safety, of security, of being secreted away behind one of these wooden constructions.

Maybe it’s got everything to do with the lingering belief that our personal identity is entirely tied up with our face and its expressions, and if it and they can’t be seen by others then our thoughts and feelings

Tor LUKASIK-FOSS,
See the Forest, 2009.
Installation details.
Photo: Latcham Gallery.



— what it is we typically strive so mightily to keep secret and private — cannot consequently be given away and the secrets of who we really are exposed to the world.

So then is *See the Forest* all about the theatricality and phenomenology of revelation and concealment? To a degree, absolutely. Of more importance, though, is that Lukasik-Foss’s installation entails an exploration and exploitation of the tension between public and private space, and of how our behaviour can be altered (even manipulated) to suit the context. As an experiential work, not merely to be passively looked upon but one intended to be engaged with physiologically, *See the Forest* in the final analysis makes us

consciously aware — even uncomfortably so — of the aesthetics of our behaviour as they pertain to and are shaped by the multiple spatial environments that comprise our lives. The personal “I” can bear little resemblance to the public “I,” and the grey area between the two is where Tor Lukasik-Foss localizes *See the Forest*.

Here, we are given to see the trees. But we need learn to see the forest. ←

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