

Uprooted

In Toronto, concrete pillars become trees in a topsy-turvy photo-install job.

By ANGELA PRUES

To Toronto commuters approaching the city's contentious Gardiner Expressway this spring, it must have seemed as if the world had first taken a bizarre twist—and then notched it up one more bizarre step and literally turned itself upside down.

The concrete columns holding up the expressway at Spadina and Lakeshore Blvd. had seemingly been turned into trees. But that wasn't all. Those trees were defying gravity and growing in reverse, their trunks reaching toward the sky. In all likelihood, it was enough to make many drivers turn around and call in sick for the day.



Had they bothered to look more closely, however, the commuters would have found that the inverted trees were actually “pillar-wrapped” photographic images courtesy of photographer Rodney Graham, with more than a little help from print provider Beyond Digital Imaging, installer Genstar Signs & Installation, a new media, and others—all in support of the Contact Toronto Photography Festival.

'Outside of the traditional museum context'

For 12 years, the Contact Toronto Photography Festival (www.contactphoto.com) has earned accolades by attracting the best and the brightest. The breadth of exhibitors, exhibitions, and audience has grown the month-long extravaganza into the largest photography event worldwide.

This year, the festival comprised the work of nearly 700 artists and spanned 220 installation venues across Toronto. In addition to traditional spaces at museums, coffee shops, and galleries, the festival's photography appeared at unique venues such as a community center for the intellectually disabled, a center for African children with HIV/AIDS, the Archives of Ontario office, a French-language school, a LensCrafters, and even an adult-only retail store.

“The locations for the public installations are thought out throughout the year,” says Emily McInnes, director of creative development for Contact, “usually by happenstance, or when I find myself in a space that I think would be a good way to look at artwork outside of the traditional museum context.”



"The idea for the Gardiner project," she says, "came up because we moved our offices in March 2007 to a space on Spadina Avenue at King. Traffic trying to get on the Gardiner backs up for three hours twice a day—once in the morning on the way into the city and again on the way out. I saw this parking lot of cars lined up as far as Queen Street as a perfect audience and wanted to give them something to think about for their commute home."

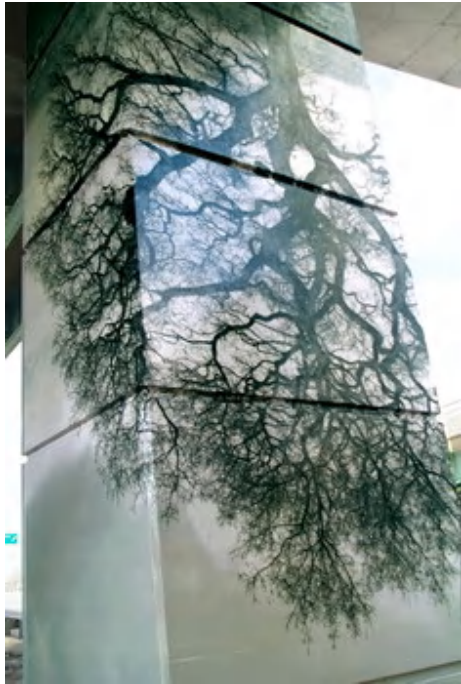
And, adds McInnes, "The Gardiner is a particularly controversial subject in the city because it acts like a barrier between the natural environment of Lake Ontario and the urban environment of the city."

A concrete solution

Which is how Graham's tree photographs came to be installed on pillars supporting one of the city's busiest highways.

Vancouver artist Rodney Graham has been creating inverted tree photographs since the early 1980s. His tree images, displayed at galleries and museums around the world, are typically photographed with a conventional field camera, then simply installed upside down.

McInnes and Contact selected 25 feature exhibits for its more traditional venues, but also selected eight invitation-only artists for public installations. Fifteen of Graham's "tree portraits"—originally taken between 1980 and the present day—were selected to adorn the Gardiner pillars.



But how to install the images once output? Initially, McInnes envisioned banners that were simply stretched around the pillars, somehow mechanically attached. But due to stringent laws when it comes to drilling and bolting support cables to the expressway overpass, that idea was hastily dropped.

For a solution, she turned to Beyond Digital Imaging (BDI, www.bdimaging.com), which had served as the festival's official print provider and sponsor for the past four years. The 65-employee shop operates from an 80,000-square-foot facility in Toronto, specializing in print jobs for retailers, corporations, advertising agencies, trade shows, and event graphics, as well as sign shops and print brokers. Its print arsenal includes more than a half-dozen large HP solvent and UV machines, as well as a 3M Scotchprint printer, a Mimaki dye-sub printer, and smaller HP, Xerox, and Gerber specialty machines. Its finishing toolbox includes laminators, liquid coaters, a heat press, two dye-sub rollers, an i-Cut, a welder, and a CNC router.

BDI, in turn, reached out to its media supplier, 3M Canada, which immediately offered up the company's new media, initially introduced in 2007 and specifically designed to adhere to highly textured surfaces. The 3M Scotchcal Graphic Film for Textured Surfaces IJ-8624/8624ES (the former for inkjet solutions, the latter for electrostatic) product would stick to the concrete pillars of the Gardiner expressway, and was permit-approved by the city.

Once Contact learned of the ability to apply media to highly textured surfaces, it immediately recognized its place in the photography festival's outdoor installations. "It would enable us to push the boundaries and provoke our audience in new and interesting ways," says McInnes.

So McInnes had now assembled the solutions needed for what she saw in her mind's eye—but the printing and installation work as mapped out would exceed the festival's budget. Fortunately, 3M Canada stepped in as a sponsor of the festival by donating some of the media for BDI's print work, and also discovered company philanthropy funds to assist with the install costs. The project now had a green light.



Painstaking attention

Rodney Graham Studios provided BDI with digital files of his artwork, created from scans. BDI manipulated these in Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator to make them suitable for large-format output.

The proofing was executed on BDI's 3M Scotchprint 2000 printer. "We output three full-size panels, did an install test on the actual columns, and asked Contact to approve them," says BDI's Kelly Tsao.

Given the thumbs up, BDI moved to the final-output phase. It used its HP XL1500 and the Scotchprint 2000 to print onto the 3M media, in conjunction with an overlaminates, to produce the 15 images. Printing was done in 300 different pieces, with each pillar requiring approximately 20 panels at 4 x 5 feet each; 6000 square feet in all.

Each panel needed pre-trimming to fit into each slab on the pillars, and the panels had to align for accuracy. One particular challenge, points out Tsao: The top of each concrete column is narrower than the base. But, she says, "The only reprint that was needed was two panels that were blown off from the column before the installer had the chance to apply them." In all, from file prep to printing, lamination, and trimming, the job took a total of seven days.



The install work went to Genstar Sign & Installation (www.genstarsigns.com) in Toronto, recommended by 3M Canada. Owner John Kotsopoulos had established Genstar two years ago, after recognizing the need for quality, experienced installation crews for various wide- and grand-format print jobs. His team had extensive schooling in all facets of installation, including experience with 3M's new media.

Kotsopoulos points out that the job was no piece of cake. For one, weather during installation was rainy and cold, which lengthened the process to six days, "probably 50-percent longer than we would have normally taken," he says. Another challenge was an unaccounted-for 2-inch groove in the pillars. Despite this groove and the aforementioned differently sized columns, however, there were no alignment issues with the 300 panels—but only because the install crew paid "painstaking" attention to alignment, says Kotsopoulos. When all was said and done, Genstar's crew comprised 11 to finalize the product (some receiving supplier on-site training with the highly textured media), as well as three scissor lifts plus a 45-foot-tall working-height bucket truck.



“We had a really good team of people involved,” says Kotsopoulos. “From an install perspective, you really appreciate a good job and BDI did a perfect job. The project was something that had never been done before on that kind of surface. We had fun doing it, no matter how difficult it became. We got there believing it would be a good day everyday.”



Extending tree life

The blend of urban and nature turned out so well with the pillars that McInnes and Contact didn’t want the images to come down at the end of the Toronto Photography Festival.

“I’m trying to keep them up until the beginning of September. I’m working with the City Councilor’s office to extend the permit,” she says.



Angela Prues is a freelance writer based in Cincinnati, Ohio. All images are courtesy of Contact Toronto Photography Festival.

Posted 2008-09-09