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BALTIMORE CITY PAPER - ARTS

## *Handle With Care*

At Last, the Roadies of the Art World Get Their Time in the Spotlight

By Blake de Pastino 4/23/2003



Pity the art handlers. In the pop-and-pyro rock show that is today's art world, they are the roadies. They are the young mandarins with hidden skills who make it all happen when the crowd isn't looking. In practically every show you've seen at a museum or big gallery, they've been the ones who have packed, shipped, trundled, mounted, installed, and--in more cases than you'd care to know--created the art on display. But of course, there's more than a little tension that attends this kind of work, because its very purpose is to seem as if it had never been done at all: The art handler's highest injunction is to leave no mark, issue no commentary, elide no details, make no noise. In an industry fueled by ego and expression, they are expected to remain selfless and silent.

Actually, it's hard to tell which pieces are meant to be about art handling and which just come off that way. Apparently, this is a kind of occupational hazard. "They tend to experience artwork not just as art, but as work," Frank says of her featured artists.

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As a result, self-expression often leads to shop talk, which accounts for why much of the show seems so self-regarding. **Toronto's Ross Bell, for instance, labors by day as a driver and technician for an art-handling company, and his artwork trades heavily in office gossip. Bell's material of choice is carpet tack strip--the thin, brad-studded slats used for laying rugs, retaining fabrics, and the like--and he uses it to slick effect. His "Anti-Tank Barricade" is a six-foot-tall, six-pointed star of lumber, like those used on the battlefield to keep troops at bay, bolted together from two-by-fours and covered in tack strip. Striking a defensive posture against the rest of the gallery, it resembles a giant asterisk denoting danger. His "Strip Crate" is even more to the point: From common hardware-store boards, he has constructed a small and inexpensive crate, the likes of which are commonly used for shipping paintings; but he has lined the inside with more carpet strip, as if hoping to destroy whatever the crate was intended to protect. This, it turns out, is not the show's only jab at the gallery establishment.** Art handlers may indeed be out to prove that they've got as much brains as balls, but the best place to do that is still the studio.