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CANADIAN  
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[Spotlight]



Still Life With Fruit 1996 Defused hand grenades, eggshells, glue Approx. 12.7 x 7.62 cm each

## Anitra Hamilton has a project

A TORONTO ARTIST FINDS  
 A BIGGER STAGE

by LAUREL MACMILLAN

Last December I received an e-mail from Anitra Hamilton, asking if I knew any entomologists. I hadn't seen her in a while, so I suggested that we go to the Royal Ontario Museum and look at some insects there. No, she wanted some specimens of her own, she said. Still, we went and, as we walked through the ROM's new galleries and caught up with one another, she explained that the bugs were for an upcoming project.

Hamilton was just finishing a particularly successful year. Last spring, her work was included in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's "Beyond/In Western New York 2005," a biennial exhibition newly expanded to include artists from nearby regions. Last summer, she was part of the Art Gallery of Ontario's exhibition "The Shape of Colour"; by late fall, she had received news that the Albright-Knox had acquired *Parade*, the work that she showed at the AGO.

Hamilton has been working and exhibiting in Toronto since the late 1980s. Her work has tended to focus on subtle manipulations of objects that tease out objects' inherent tensions. Through the 1990s, she participated regularly in group exhibitions in and around Toronto, often at artist-run centres or public galleries like the Koffler Gallery and The Power Plant. Nineteen-ninety-nine

Portrait by Miguel Jacob

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*Bomb Ride* 2004  
Coin-operated children's ride,  
defused bomb, enamel paint  
2.44 m x 91.4 cm x 91.4 cm  
Photo David Popplow

was a breakthrough year, with solo shows, international exhibitions and critical attention following one another in short order.

It was the year of her solo exhibition "Bombshell" at Material Matters on Queen Street West. She presented an arsenal of defused Second World War American Air Force bombs that she had entirely covered in mosaics of crushed eggshells. The bombs were suspended from the ceiling, at chest height or eye level, casting shadows that filled the space. The colours of the eggshells read like camouflage. It was powerful work that represented the convergence of destructive and aesthetic impulses.

The work caught the eye of the Italian curator Renato Barilli, who included it in the 2002 exhibition "Officina America" in Bologna. Hamilton subsequently expanded the series; several versions of the large bombs have been produced. My favourite is coated in eggshells that were first decorated with bright colours using a traditional Ukrainian "pysanka" technique and then broken. The obvious labour involved is an element that is almost constantly present in Hamilton's oeuvre.

*Still Life With Fruit* (1996) was a series of three hand grenades covered with robin, starling, emu and duck eggshells. The subtle variations in colour and texture evident in the crackled shells make them resemble precious glazed ceramic artifacts in the shapes of a cherry, a pineapple and a pear. The pear, she explained, is a French grenade from the First World War, while the other two are American, of Second World War vintage. Camouflaged by both the eggshells and their title, they perfectly embody the fragility of pent-up rage.

Hamilton also used a decommissioned bomb in 2004's *Bomb Ride*—a coin-operated, supermarket-style children's ride made from a cheerfully painted American-made MK-82. And military links crop up elsewhere. *Red Cross* (1998) is a three-foot-high Victoria Cross medal adorned with three thousand of the disposable red poppies that we wear around Remembrance Day. Hamilton added a tiny piece of black felt to the centre of each one, to recreate how they looked when she was a child in the 1970s. *Oh!* is a memorial wreath covered not with leaves or greenery but with plastic toy soldiers. Together with *Life Buoy* (2003), a life-saving ring cast from solid white soap, the works form the letters O, X and O, shorthand for hugs and a kiss.

Increasingly, territoriality and cultural appropriation resonate through her work, which also seems to be naturally migrating

out of doors. At the 2003 Havana biennial, Hamilton tagged various outdoor locales with flaglike military stripes by applying strips of coloured electrical tape. Plans are in the works for other international projects, in Shanghai and Berlin. In China, she will install a diving board on the top of a skyscraper and repair potholes with mosaics of blue-and-white porcelain that recalls Delft earthenware—a veiled reference to the colonizing history that is part of her Dutch heritage. In Germany, she plans to take over and displace elements of regional culture, appropriating elements of rural folkloric dress and driving them to the city.

Present in all this is a restlessness symptomatic of Hamilton's desire to expand her practice and align it with the activities of other artists who do not work in fixed locales or whose work is not strictly studio- or gallery-based. Many of the artists that we discussed during our trip to the ROM are known for their migratory, non-localized practices, and none of them are Canadian. We spoke about Aleksandra Mir (Poland-born, Swedish citizen, living in New York), Francis Alys (Belgian, living in Mexico), Gabriel Orozco (Mexican, living and working in Paris, New York and Mexico City) and the Spanish trickster Santiago Sierra, among others. What these artists share is an approach that is not always object-based but can include ephemeral actions, and that is informed by experiences of different places and cultures and often includes a measure of sardonic wit. Our discussions of their work were an acknowledgement of the need for artists to function within a much larger sense of community.

Hamilton is also known as the proprietor of Satchel Gallery, which began in Toronto in March, 2004, when Hamilton decided to carry around a friend's artwork in her bright yellow courier bag. The rest is history. During the past two years, she has been carrying work by a different artist in the bag each month, discreetly showing it at the many openings, lectures and art events she attends. Some of the works have been participatory, like Jon Sasaki's popular *Guestbook*, or Pete Gazendam's wire-frame eyeglasses, the lenses of which had been clouded by means of Dremel grinding. Others happen to be satchel-sized or specifically designed for the bag, like Kathryn Ruppert-Dazai's knit work, which was in the bag when we met up. Hamilton opened the yellow flap, reached inside and grabbed what first seemed like a piece of multicoloured winter clothing but which turned out to be a pop-up mountain.

The gallery is wherever Anitra goes, and although she doesn't say it is anything more than an enjoyable way to create dialogue, the project could be read as a subtle comment on the lack of opportunities for artists—a way of taking things into their own hands. Its planned retirement at its two-year point was pushed back after the Turner Prize-winning artist Jeremy Deller agreed to make a Satchel appearance to coincide with his exhibition at the Art Gallery of York University this September. Then she goes to Berlin, and opening a German branch is a tempting thought...

As spring showed signs of arriving, I received another e-mail from Hamilton. She had gotten her first shipment of bugs. She had found an obliging entomologist in Montreal. ■