Eli W. King

Small-scale, often rural, art spaces offer a personal and intuitive alternative to contemporary art's usual global hegemony. Grounded in everyday experience, these hyper-focused "micro-museums," roadside attractions, and artist-built environments, curated by individuals, small collectives, or communities, rather than by larger arts institutions or provincial governments, are spaces that offer possibilities in "vernacular curation." With a focus on folk and outsider art, found objects, and personal archives, these collections are made fully visible to visitors, and operate through the vision of dedicated volunteers, artists, and curators. Through interviews with the artist-curators of a selection of these spaces along the Canadian-American East Coast, an examination is provided of how workshops, classes, consignment, and exhibitions use storytelling, intuitive assemblage of objects, and accessible materials to share cultural knowledge.

THE VERNACULAR CURATORIAL IMAGINATION

VOL. 1

Eli W. King

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Cover artwork by Eli W. King and Akira Jakkson.

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Completed in partial fulfillment of a Master of Fine Arts in Criticism & Curatorial Practice at OCAD University. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through OCAD University's Research Ethics Board [2025-82].

Editorial design and typesetting by Akira Jakkson and Eli W. King

Small batch edition, printed-on-demand by Blurb Inc.

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April 1st, 2026

Acknowledgments

A great thanks to the interviewees, Robin Hanson, Terry Havlis Drahos, Kevin West, Sherry Chandler, and Clare Dolan, for their participation, gracious donations of time, and the sharing of their experiences.

Thank you to my partner, Akira Jakkson, my mother, Jennifer Newberry, my grandparents, Jill and Robert Simmons, and the rest of my family for all their love, support, and inspiration.

Thank you to my Ontario College of Art and Design faculty advisors, Amish Morrell, and Michael Prokopow, and to my external examiner Suzanne Carte, as well as to the Criticism and Curatorial Practice faculty, Jim Drobnick, Suzanne Morrisette, Tairone Bastien, and other influential OCAD faculty, Michelle Miller and Peter Morin, for the opportunities they've provided, invaluable guidance, time, tutelage, dialogue, and literature recommendations, which greatly supported the development of my research. A further thanks to my peers in the 2026 Criticism and Curatorial Practice Master's cohort for their support and camaraderie.

I acknowledge that this land called Tkaronto, Ontario, where I am privileged to live and work, and where this project was developed, is governed by Treaty 13 and the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Agreement. This land is the traditional, unceded territory of the Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Anishinaabe peoples, including the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Tkaronto has always been a meeting place, and today the city is home to Indigenous peoples from many nations, as well as settlers and immigrants from around the world.

By way of the great Shawnee leader Tecumseh, who was born in and fought for an Indigenous Ohio, and later died fighting to defend Indigenous lands in Ontario, I also acknowledge the land that generously provided for my growth and development in the Southeastern Ohio region of the Ohio River Valley. This land is the unceded territory of the Shawnee and Ohio Valley tribes and continues to serve as a home for many Lenape (Delaware), Miami, Ottawa, Seneca, Cherokee, and Wyandot peoples who sought refuge in Ohio in the late-18th century.

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Foreword: A Case for The Vernacular Curatorial Imagination

by Eli W. King

> Shifting the spotlight from culturally dominant to marginal organizations affords a way of demonstrating the heterogeneity of museums. It shows that museums can be ad hoc do-it-yourself undertakings, family concerns, group enterprises, and business operations as well as large-scale commercial ventures or institutions held in trust. It establishes that curators are not necessarily trained professionals and that knowledgeable staff, and creative displays are found outside of established venues…Instead of assuming that exhibitions are more-or-less discrete from the buildings they occupy, or from the surrounding landscape, I conceive of museums as assemblages wherein the neighbouring rivers, streets, shelving units, lighting systems, or proffered cups of tea may all be important elements both in how those places are experienced and what happens therein.
>
> ***Fiona Candlin***[1]

The artist-curators[2] who make up the sporadic roadmap of "vernacular curation" would not necessarily self-define as artist-curators nor likely choose the term vernacular; they are largely situated outside of the academic and the institutional. These individuals do, however, collect, display, and create bodies of work meant to communicate to an audience of both passersbys and locals a sense of their everyday lived experiences and regional surroundings. Collectively, these artist-curators assemble installations compulsively, intuitively, and purely imaginatively–'bodging'[3] works with accessible materials as folk, outsider, visionary, and vernacular artists are wont to do. What is called 'vernacular art' arises from a desire to make the everyday, laborious, and mundane personal and meaningful; thus, vernacular curation has greater affordances in cultural and regional expression.

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1 Fiona Candlin, *Micromuseology: An Analysis of Small Independent Museums* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 10, 28.

2 An 'expanded field' of curating that frames curation as an artistic practice. Alison Green, *When Artists Curate: Contemporary Art and the Exhibition as Medium.* (Reaktion Books, 2018).

3 British-English slang, to use the skill of improvisation to assemble together a functional, if not elegant, solution.

Collections and environments are made fully visible and tactile to visitors, and a narrative is formed through the overlap of objects and themes, made anew through assemblage.

I use the term "vernacular" as a careful concession, the terms "folk" and "outsider" are frequently used art historical references which reaffirm a determinedly exclusive canon that has been too loosely used to represent art by all untrained artists, particularly art by anyone dismissed as 'other.' While the term vernacular also poses problems, being in many ways a substitute for the prior terms without substantive change to the marginalization that those terms connoted,[4] my use of vernacular is indebted to Lucy Lippard and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. In "Mixed Blessings,"[5] Lippard uses the term vernacular to imply a "made at home" quality through which people speak for themselves in a manner distanced from the culture around high art. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in "Destination Culture,"[6] likewise uses the term vernacular to represent the cultural and aesthetic richness of commonness, folk or rudimentary culture, and so-called 'bad taste,' or kitsch, and its connoisseurship. The question arises of the value of separating these artist-curators from other artists and curators, but these vernacular creatives are already quite singular. They are the category without category, what's left when everything else is scooped up and commodified. To the effect that, "these [vernacular] artists too are taking part in the struggle against the flattened stereotypes promoted by mass culture."[7] They are the produce stand by the side of the highway, not the deeply commercialized indoor, air-conditioned, organic, 'farm to table' elite grocer.

I first encountered spaces of vernacular curation growing up in southeastern Ohio in the foothills of the Appalachian mountains. Sunday drives with my father, which would take us along winding, wooded roads, often beside derelict railroad tracks, and into neighbouring towns and villages strung along the broad and winding Ohio River, were a fact of life. I've found that in much of rural America and Canada, if not internationally,[8] country roads like these are often marked

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4 Grey Gundaker, "Becoming Art: Life Spans, Biographies, and the Shelp Collection." *In Testimony: Vernacular Art of the African-American South,* Arthur C. Danto. (Abrams Books, 2002), 44.

5 Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*. (Pantheon, 2000), 78.

6 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Disputing Taste." *In Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Univ of California Press, 1998), 259.

7 Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America,* 78.

8 Various prominent institutions and projects in Europe and the UK suggest these types of spaces exist throughout at least, but most probably beyond, the western world. SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments—was incorporated in Spain. It is one of the predominant organizations with such a focus.
Micromuseology: An Analysis of Small Independent Museums by Fiona Candlin and *Contemporary Popular Art from the UK* by Jeremy Deller focus primarily on spaces in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland.

with hand-painted signs for captivating, unique, inexplicable museums and art environments.

In southeastern Ohio, for example, the enduring spaces of interest were the Pencil Sharpener Museum,[9] a museum showcasing about 3,479 pencil sharpeners just outside of Logan, Ohio, and the Dairy Barn Arts Centre,[10] a public gallery housed in a former Athens, Ohio asylum's dairy barn, which exhibits quilts and other regional arts. Then, if one were to drive just a bit further into West Virginia, you would come upon the Mothman Museum and Research Center,[11] a museum in Point Pleasant, West Virginia dedicated to the cryptid of the same name, and Hillbilly Hotdogs,[12] a restaurant set amidst a junkyard artist-built environment. In a rural area that often felt like an entertainment desert, curiously stopping in to waste away the afternoon in these spaces was always captivating; it felt like a discovery. As a kid, I spent more time in these independent spaces than I ever did in the more formally acknowledged art galleries and museums, the nearest of which were two to four hours, or more, from where we lived.

Later in my adolescence, I'd spend time with my mother at the Heidelberg Project[13] in Detroit, Michigan. This site by Tyree Guyton, is perhaps the most infamous, street-long, artist-built environment in America. As I have had the privilege to travel a portion of North America, I have continued to prioritize visiting such spaces. I still find them, although a bit further off the beaten path, to be broadly more impactful and memorable than my visits to major metropolitan galleries. Yet, in comparison to those major galleries, these sites are held in little regard in academic discourse.[14] They represent a sort of organically developed culture with little to no expectation of compensation or recognition, a culture of vernacular curation, focusing on the everyday and accessible. Sites where curation, in the vein of the artist-curator model, is transubstantiated to be a vernacular-art practice.

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9 The Pencil Sharpener Museum's collection was started by Rev. Paul Johnson in 1989, Johnson died in 2010 and the collection was moved to the Hocking Hills Regional Welcome Center.

10 The Mothman Museum and Research Center was founded in 2006 in Point Pleasant, West Virgina. It houses the largest collection of props and memorabilia from the movie *The Mothman Prophecies* (2002), among a broader collection of Mothman art and memorabilia. www.mothmanmuseum.com.

11 The Dairy Barn Arts Centre was founded in 1979 by Harriet and Ora Anderson, the Hocking Valley Arts Council, and local artists and crafts people, in a barn previously owned by and on the grounds of the Athens Mental Health Center. They host the Quilt National, the largest and longest running juried exhibition of art quilts in the United States. www.dairybarn.org.

12 Hillbilly Hotdogs is a roadside hot dog stand and tourist attraction located in Lesage, West Virginia. The restaurant is two stories, including a salvaged school bus, graffiti contributed in part by visitors, and various assembled objects. www.hillbillyhotdogs.com.

13 The Heidelberg Project was started in 1986 by the artist Tyree Guyton, assisted by his grandfather Sam "Grandpa Sam" Mackey, transforming Guyton's childhood street into an artist-built environment featuring works such as *The Dotty Wotty House*. The Project celebrates its 35th anniversary in 2026.

14 Candlin, *Micromuseology: An Analysis of Small Independent Museums,* 15.

"Micromuseums," a concept of the British researcher and Professor of Museology at the University of London, Fiona Candlin, account for small-scale, single-subject institutions that operate with limited financial, spatial, and human resources. Often disparate from formal academic frameworks, these galleries, museums and cultural repositories welcome visitors into intimate spaces where curators—typically community volunteers or independent founders—serve as guides, crafting personal and narrative-driven interpretations of densely arranged collections. There is ample crossover between the micromuseum and the artist-built environment, both being composite works intended to be viewed in their entirety rather than as a grouping of discrete works. They are produced additively and organically without formal designs, built from personal and cultural experiences, availability of materials, and a desire for personal creative expression. Likewise, roadside attractions are usually some combination of the micromuseum and a built-environment.

These spaces all tell stories of contemporary relevance, marked by intuitively assembled exhibitions of highly specific collections and displays—ranging from the rare to the mass-produced, the aesthetically refined to the comedic and amusing—that serve not only to educate but to subvert, intentionally or otherwise, hegemonic preconceptions of a curated space. The vernacular curatorial imagination resists any category but its own, and reflects contemporary themes and styles exclusive to vernacular concern. These sites reflect philosophies born out of their environment and the maker's own idiosyncrasies, with little influence from a single canon. They resist objectivity, reflecting only the artist's or community's own subjective experience and perception. The curators do not ask permission; their sites pop up wherever space can be found.

The vernacular curator resists traditional forms of institutional viability, not through active resistance, but in that their work is so contextually rooted. Little effort is made by the vernacular artist-curator to tailor their work to an audience that does not already appreciate the work's nuance. Vernacular artist-curators simply have stories to tell, whether they be free-associative, local, historical, fantastical, familial, devotional, or nonsensical. They make exhibitions intuitively, as opposed to academically or commercially. They are local; and a visitor must be purposeful in visiting in ways arguably different from conventional, established, elite, and culturally celebrated institutions. They are ephemeral, the sites often living and dying, at least in the spirit of the founder's contagious passion, with the passing of said founder.

The vernacular curated space, however desirable, is equally hard to market. Their ego is hard to pin down; they rarely sign their work, nor is it made portable in a way that allows it to be confined to a plinth or frame. Although the externally preconceived nostalgic, naive, or romantic quality of the vernacular artist-curator is perhaps similarly valorized to how folk art has been,[15] it cannot be similarly invested in the moment it becomes commercially attractive, and thus appropriated, as it fundamentally cannot be removed from its geography. Even tourist boards have a hard time accepting the vernacular site. Even if there might be a need for unique sites to attract visitors, institutional tourism is unable to fully take control of them due to the unconcealable personal voice of the creator, as well as the often remote or "undesirable" neighbourhood in which these spaces reside.[16]

Perhaps sites of vernacular curation are of an ephemeral, outdated model. Historically, what little income had maintained these sites came from the explosion of tourists on newly connected highways in the mid-century. However, the older spaces that remain are ever more individual, and further awareness has come through a cult following on websites like Atlas Obscura. Hopefully, there will always be someone who is interested in the creative expressions of local eccentrics, made through their public works, as they are undeniably interesting and equally valuable.

The curated collection of interviews that follows represents a survey taken while road tripping for two weeks in July of 2025, leaving from Toronto, traveling through the Canadian Maritimes, and making my way back through New England.[17] This survey is chosen subjectively, not as a broad representative sample; it is inherently limited in this regard. However, road tripping for its own sake is largely how these spaces are intended to be encountered, through travel by car, framed by impressions of the surrounding environment, and not always on purpose. The Hanson Sculpture Garden and Gallery, the Charles MacDonald Concrete House Museum, the Hooked Rug Museum of North America, and the Museum of Everyday Life provide a broad overview of the varying operations, demographics, time periods, visitor engagements, exhibition styles, themes, and modes of founding afforded by the vernacular curatorial imagination.

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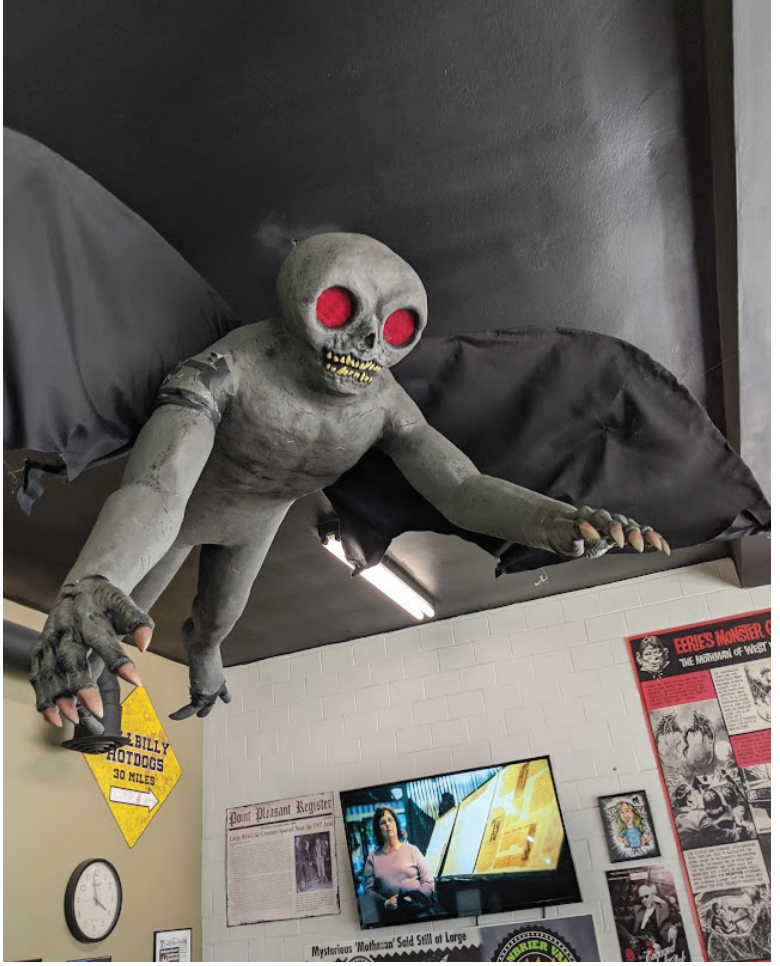
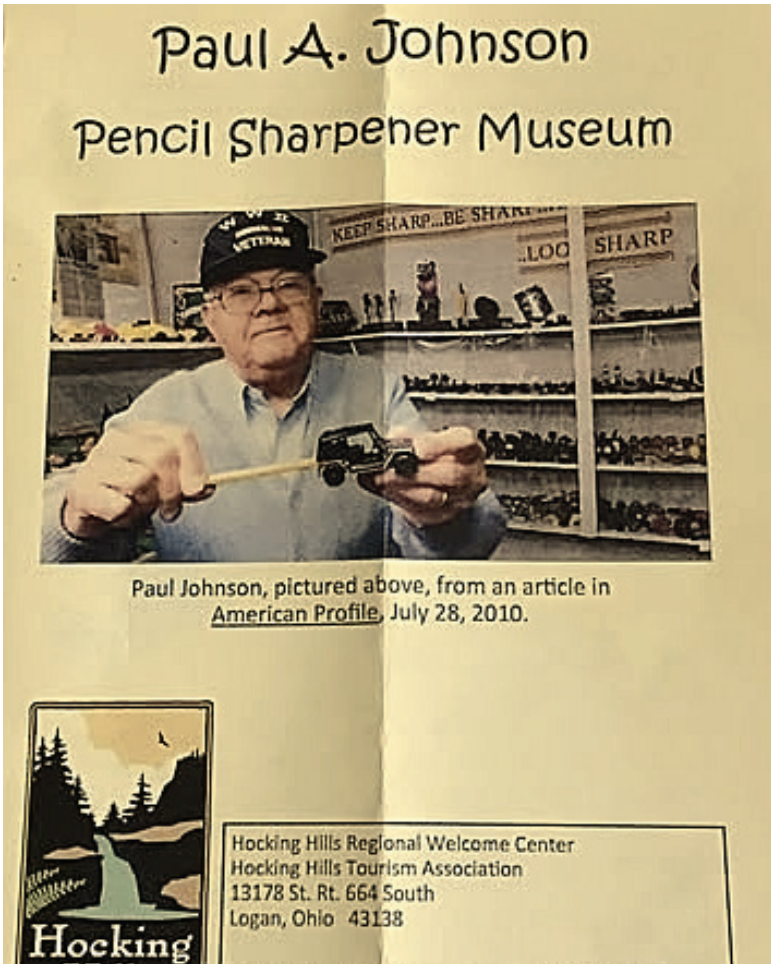
15 Ian McKay, *Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*. (McGill-Queen's Press - MQUP, 2009).

16 John Beardsley et al., *Connecting the Dots: Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project*. (Painted Turtle, 2007).

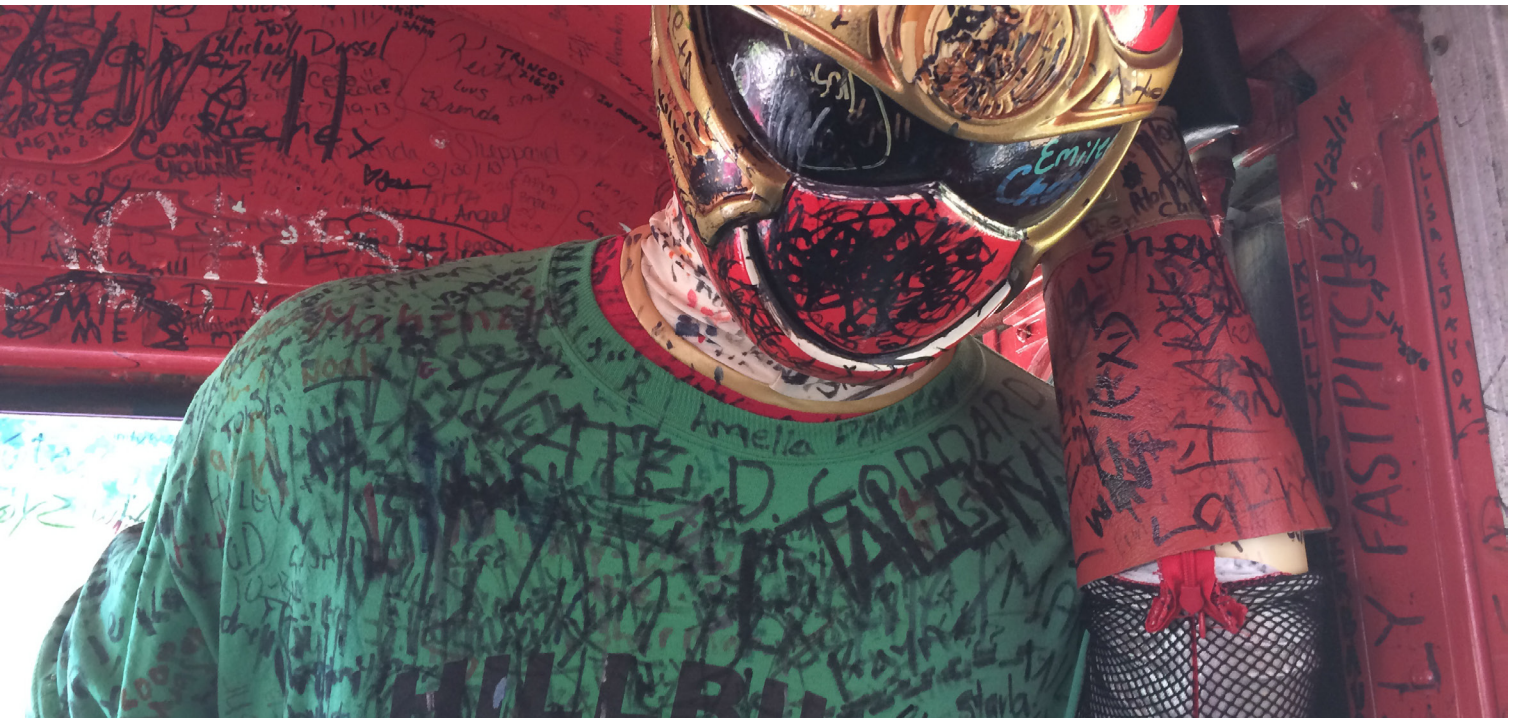
17 Sites of concern located in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Vermont, respectively.



Mothman Museum and Research Center interior. Point Pleasant, West Virgina, 2020.



Paul A. Johnson Pencil Sharpener Museum. Handout from Hocking Hills Tourism Association, post the Museum's relocation the Hocking Hills Welcome Center. Logan, Ohio.



Hillbilly Hotdogs, interior of refurbished bus dining area. Lesage, West Virginia, 2016.

(Above) Tyree Guyton, The Heidelberg Project sign. Detroit, Michigan. (2025).
(Below) The Heidelberg Project. To the left, Tyree Guyton, *The Numbers House*.
To the right, Tyree Guyton, various assemblages. Detroit, Michigan, 2018.

An Overview of Spaces in Dialogue

The Hanson Gallery and Sculpture Garden, in French Lake, New Brunswick, was founded by Robin Hanson, an artist in wood, concrete, epoxy and fiberglass, clay and bronze, as well as a business owner and environmental advocate. Tucked along a rural dirt road under a canopy of trees, the gallery and sculpture garden are immersed in New Brunswick's lush landscape. Inside the gallery are painted New Brunswick landscapes, while the garden features sculptures of native and exotic animals, mythological and extinct creatures, and regional history. Visitors explore the grounds at their own pace, making the experience both immersive and personally engaging.

The MacDonald Concrete House Museum, in Centreville, Nova Scotia, is a project preserving the legacy of Charles "Charlie" MacDonald, a Nova Scotia tradesman, socialist organizer, and folk artist known for painting Maritime landscapes and experimenting with concrete as a sculptural medium. Despite producing a large body of work, he rarely earned money from his art aside from a brief period as a sign painter in British Columbia. In 1912, he and his wife Mabel constructed their concrete home in Centreville, initially a one-room factory for Charlie's Kentville Concrete Company. Charlie and Mabel filled the property with their artwork. Charlie lived there until his death in 1967, and Mabel remained until 1981. In 1991, as an acknowledgment of the site's cultural importance, the Charles MacDonald Concrete House of Centreville Society was established to operate the home as a museum. The museum recently undertook significant restoration work, but today the house and grounds showcase the MacDonalds' work alongside exhibitions by contemporary artists.

(Above), Robin Hanson, Bigfoot sculpture. Hanson Sculpture Garden, 2025.
(Below), MacDonald Gallery with *The Trophy Buck* and other assorted MacDonald concrete sculptures. MacDonald Concrete House Museum, 2025.

The Hooked Rug Museum of North America, in Queensland, Nova Scotia, was founded by Suzanne Conrod. The museum houses a permanent collection of hooked rugs organized by province, maker, stylistic tradition, and period. In addition to this permanent collection, the museum presents annual rotating exhibitions that spotlight singular Canadian rug hookers, as well as an individual artist or distinctive community of American or international hookers. The museum is committed to sustaining the craft through a fibre shop offering consigned rugs and specialized supplies, alongside workshops, classes, and community gatherings that support and connect contemporary rug hookers.

The Museum of Everyday Life, in Glover, Vermont, was founded by Clare Dolan. The museum reimagines the roadside attraction as an artist-curated practice rooted in conceptual inquiry. The small gallery and museum embrace what it calls a state of “glorious obscurity” through both semi-permanent displays and rotating exhibitions devoted to ordinary yet rarely examined subjects. The themes range from commonplace tools like pencils, safety pins, and toothbrushes, to more diffuse phenomena like dust, stains, and lists. Operating as a collaborative, self-service space, the museum invites visitors to switch the lights on and off and to buy merchandise or make donations on the honor system. The museum also offers workshops on grassroots exhibition-making and micro-museum practices. Each exhibition is assembled through community contributions of objects and ideas, installation being a collective act that foregrounds the connections between people and things.

(Above), Garret Gallery and Factory. Hooked Rug Museum of North America, 2025.
(Below), Handpainted signs at entrance to Museum of Everyday Life, 2025.

What the Vernacular Curatorial Imagination Affords: Establishing Themes of Concern

COMMUNITY

> There are many local museums without pretension that operate as romantic and nativistic community memorials and historic sites. These are very specific, very local, and appeal widely to travelers; there is little effort at interpretation or academic musing. In a sense, the small outfits nestled along highways at gas stations…are more 'folk' than the avowed folk museums, for these are not merely about 'the folk' but are by and for them as well.
>
> ***Howard Wight Marshall***[18]

Vernacularly curated spaces and environments are incarnated or preserved as a medium for building equitable and accessible community archives. As an act of care toward the community stories and motifs that the artist-curators feel need to be told, learned, and interacted with physically. The vernacular quality of curation is furthered by mutually beneficial and pragmatic collaborations and engagements with community volunteers and visitors. "The presence of these figures helps bind together the community…Artists and those bitten by the infectious bug of creativity but who live outside of the community feel a kinship and immediately want to be a part of it."[19]

The Hooked Rug Museum of North America was founded by those who saw a vacancy in the museological representation and preservation of their craft, and thus took it upon themselves to carve out the space for this representation in their local community. The hooked rug artists involved with the museum's operation are by no means otherwise involved with the arts, but they are heavily involved in the craft. Most volunteers picked up rug hooking later in life; many older craftswomen retired from other professions. From these beginnings, they are a pillar within their, perhaps surprisingly diverse and numerous, international community of rug hookers.

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18 Marshall, Howard Wight, "Folklife and the Rise of American Folk Museums." In *Folklife and Museums* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 202–3.

19 Jenenne Whitfield, "Inside View," in *Connecting the Dots: Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project* (Painted Turtle, 2007), 108.

The museum draws a unique niche audience from all over the world, as the only museum with its focus. The museum also ingratiates itself with neighbours and unlikely visitors by always taking the opportunity to teach rug hooking, and by making their space available to be reserved by the public for use of all kinds, from the adjacent knitters to the quite distinct K-9 trainers.

The Museum of Everyday Life and the MacDonald Concrete House Museum, with a similar intent to the Hooked Rug Museum, not only provide a cultural space in their communities, but also encourage locals to participate. The Museum of Everyday Life runs workshops teaching children and adults alike how to make their own portable archives and micromuseums, and further engage with the community through broad open calls each exhibition season. These open calls and collaborative collection workshops[20] serve to foster dialogue, share stories, and provide a platform for the lending or donation of objects and the development of ideas for exhibitions and performances, in which the community often participates.

Likewise, the MacDonald Concrete House Museum, runs workshops on everything from rug hooking and painting to screen printing and sculpting. The house also hosts regular open houses for the community and engages with visiting artists to develop and exhibit work throughout the house and on the grounds. The MacDonald House is run by local volunteers who, previous to their appointments, simply engaged as visitors with the site and appreciated its story. Fostering relationships and finding leadership in this manner can keep these sites open for years to come.

The Hanson Sculpture Garden is the sole creative labour of Robin Hanson, and brings facsimiles of global museological artifacts and themes to Hanson's rural community. Children can hug and trace their fingers along dinosaurs and elephants, seen in the context of New Brunswick colonial forts and the largest sturgeon ever caught in French Lake. Out in the community, groups like the girls' softball team, the Silverbacks, get to claim a life-size baseball-playing gorilla sculpture as their own. The museum encourages creative agency in their small rural community; locals have a tactile way to engage with the world, and reportedly, tourists reciprocally engage with the community. The presence of these creatives helps bind together the community. Through the objects Hanson and the artist-curators of concern make and the environments they build, their communities are provided a sense of place.[21]

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20 Announced annually by Clare Dolan on the Museum of Everyday Life website. www.museumofeverydaylife.org.

21 Manley, Roger, "Strangers Among Us." In *Self-Made Worlds: Visionary Folk Art Environments* (Aperture, 1997), 106–9.

Pamphlets, MacDonald Concrete House Museum, 2025.

CONTINUITY

> As icons of imaginative life, these places strike me as worthy of official sufferance, if not support. Like them or not, they are emblems of resurrection, of the capacity of individuals-arguably, even of communities-to re-create themselves from ruins, with or without official involvement.
>
> ***John Beardsley***[22]

What does it mean for site-specific built environments and micromuseums to be lost, and what does it take for these spaces to be salvaged? The MacDonald Concrete House Museum, originally built by Charles MacDonald, was a product of socialist ideals and co-operative labour in rural Nova Scotia. There, the house still stands, and the museum aims to follow the same philosophies on which the house was built. The house's resilience is already a defiance of how sites of vernacular curation are most often, near definitionally, ephemeral beyond the lifespan of their creators. But the Concrete House Museum is now operated by a board of dedicated volunteers, involved in the arts and throughout the community, the site's longevity based primarily on these volunteers' belief that the house is worth salvaging.

Ideally, any cultural object should be displayed in situ.[23] Through its curatorial mandate centered on what the founder's do-it-yourself socialist ideals might permit, the house was renovated on site and with only a minuscule budget, made possible by many community donations of time and labour, and through practical decisions, like situating MacDonald's paintings in a temperature-controlled archive that utilizes recycled retail shelves. This revitalization displays what can be done within a community. The museum's artifacts are not behind glass, not moved and recontextualized, or persisting only in photos, but preserved in continuity. The Concrete House preserved features like its roughly textured walls, reminding the viewer of the building's concrete construction, and a stairwell turned skylight, providing a glimpse into what used to be MacDonald's chinchilla coup in the attic.

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22 John Beardsley, "Art or Eyesore?," in *Connecting the Dots: Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project* (Painted Turtle, 2007), 43.

23 Hamilton, Laurie, Craig Dix, and Jennifer McLaughlin. *The Painted House of Maud Lewis: Conserving a Folk Art Treasure* (Goose Lane Editions, 2001), 9.

The Museum of Everyday Life, similarly, was established in a repurposed dairy barn in rural Vermont, contributing to the theming of exhibitions around everyday labours. In a recent exhibition on stains,[24] attention was directed to the staining of the wood in one corner of the gallery, left over from the milking of cows. This acknowledgment suggests a continuity of the space from utility to artistry and vice versa, reinforcing curatorial relevance and representing a form of vernacular research. The museum revises how cultural history is told, including vernacular cultural materials representative of regional life and work.[25]

THEMES

> Is it an art institution? A community-based museum? A stage for popular culture? Today, one can say that the presence of the Other is the downfall of the modern museum. It disrupts the colonial domain of domesticated images and imaginaries to allow unsubordinated creation and disobedient appropriations.
>
> ***Bruno Brulon Soares***[26]

The Museum of Everyday Life exhibits the stain, dust, and the safety pin; likewise, the Hanson Sculpture Garden displays animals, local and exotic, but also extinct and imaginary. Both spaces present eclectic narratives not tied down to any expected associations– they freely associate, in this way, these spaces present new ways of thinking. They provide a space where goofy Yoda appropriations, toothbrushes, Bigfoot, matches, bridge trolls, and personal hygiene can all be explored to the fullest extent of what they may afford. The artifact or object, commonplace or rare - and its approximation or simulacrum, is no longer treated as sacred, but as the subject of play.

The vernacular artifact, object, or theme might be transfigured into an evocative assemblage that both brings attention back to the object at its most basic, and sparks the imagination in order to think of the object in a new way.

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24 *Evidence, Residue, Memory: Stains*. An exhibition exploring associations with stains. Curated by Clare Dolan at the Museum of Everyday Life. Running from May 31st, 2025 to present.
25 Wight, “Folklife and the Rise of American Folk Museums.” In *Folklife and Museums,* 193.
26 Bruno Brulon Soares, “Museums and Their Borders: Teaching and Learning From Experimental Museology,” in *Decolonising Museology: Decolonising the Curriculum,* vol. 3 (International Committee for Museology, 2022), 53.

There might be an exhibition on pencils featuring an archway made from them,[27] or a display on deadly human diseases as horror movie monsters.[28] As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a preeminent voice in performance and folklore scholarship, states while arguing for how the commonplace is often conflated with bad taste, "the curating of kitsch [the vernacular] has become the supreme act of connoisseurship. The problem is no longer bad taste but good, which is conservative, boring, acquiescent."[29]

The vernacular curated space can also simply be opened up through allowing engagements with artists to organically occur and form the basis of exhibitions. The MacDonald Concrete House is open to installing such distinct work as an inflatable apple camera obscura or folk art automata; if for no other purpose than their curators being in dialogue with the relatively unknown artists behind these works. The museum is open to what affordances might become apparent by putting the concrete deer sculptures on permanent display in conversation with the former works. The vernacular curatorial space is not a blank canvas or a framed piece of fine art, but a palimpsest, a product of all its previous associations. Recycled materials, rough concrete walls, and echoes of previous utilitarian incarnations contextually frame new work. It is a living archive of everything previously written, not treated reverently, but approached with an unconstrained appetite for further imaginative expression and dialogue.

Museum of Everyday Life bumper sticker, 2025.

27 A piece made in part for *Draw the Line and Make Your Point: the Pencil and the 21st Century*. An exhibition that offered unique ways of looking at the Pencil, including unlikely objects made from pencils. Curated by Clare Dolan at the Museum of Everyday Life. Ran from June 2013 to May 2014. The pencil arch is now on permanent display.

28 A display at the Hanson Sculpture Garden dedicated to pandemics and to New Brunswick health care professionals. AIDS is represented by a *Scream* (1996) slasher, COVID-19 is represented by Nosferatu, and America's Indigenous Diseases are represented by Bigfoot, among other pandemics and famous villains. The sculptures are accompanied by death statistics and other didactics.

29 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Disputing Taste." In *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Univ of California Press, 1998), 276.


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Riviere du Loup
Edmundston
Fort Kent
Van Buren
St. Leonard
Grand Falls
Caribou
Ft. Fairfield
Presque Isle
Mars Hill
Houlton
Woodstock
Campbellton
Dalhousie
Bathurst
BAY OF
Newcastle
NEW
BRUNSWIC
MAINE
BAXTER STATE PARK
Millinocket
Fredericton
St. John
Fairville
Sussex
St. Stephen
Calais
St. Andrews
Eastport
Lubec
Machias
East Machias
Ellsworth
Bangor
Brewer
Old Town
Orono
Dexter
Dover-Foxcroft
Pittsfield
Hampden
Bucksport
Jonesport
BAY OF FUNDY
GRAND MANAN CHANNEL
GRAND MANAN ISLAND
KEDGWICK GAME REFUGE
PLASTER ROCK - RENOUS GAME REFUGE
LEPREAU GAME REFUGE
BURPEE GAME REFUGE
Digby

CHALEUR
SHIPPIGAN ISLAND
MISCOU ISLAND
TEXACO
N
S
E
W
MAGDALEN ISLANDS (Quebec)
GRINDSTONE
Havre Aubert
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND NATIONAL PARK
NORTHUMBERLAND STRAIT
CAPE BRETON ISLAND
Summerside
Charlottetown
Souris
Moncton
Amherst
Springhill
Pictou
New Glasgow
Stellarton
Truro
Kentville
Windsor
Halifax
Dartmouth
MINAS CHANNEL
Minas Basin
LISCOMB GAME SANCTUARY
NOVA SCOTIA

Robin Hanson Sculpture Garden

French Lake, New Brunswick, Canada

The viewing experience of objects in museums and major galleries is often an unnecessarily intimidating display of global high cultural hegemony, through the display of invaluable, often decontextualized, global works. Museums and galleries can also be unnecessarily academically self-indulgent, prioritizing lengthy, densely written didactics. As such, these spaces can be quite inaccessible to uninitiated audiences. Glass cases and off-display, inaccessible to the public, collection rooms, as a ubiquitous practice, create a barrier between the objects and the public.

Robin Hanson, both inside and outside his Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, is, by contrast, a generous contributor of objects to his small rural community. Robin's wide range of sculpturally rendered wildlife and historical memorials can be intimately engaged with throughout the community. The work engages with locals, sparks their imagination, and represents the region's history, environment, and culture. As well as situating the community with objects of international relevance, objects that otherwise wouldn't be seen in the context of French Lake, New Brunswick. Robin's work is tactile, accessible, entertaining, and informative, suggesting possibilities for an enduringly tangible and local future for subjective museology, through the artist-built environment.

Robin Hanson is an artist, entrepreneur, and environmental advocate. As well as founding the Hanson Gallery and Sculpture Garden, Robin is also the founder and president of the Oromocto Watershed Association, having donated over 400 acres of unique habitat to the association, near the gallery and sculpture garden. The gallery and garden are themselves down a dusty country road and beneath a canopy of trees, situated well within New Brunswick's natural beauty.

Robin represents this beauty in the gallery through countless painted landscapes covering the walls, as well as many native, exotic, mythological, and extinct wildlife in the sculpture garden. The walk through the garden is self-guided, and immediately engaging and individual. Dinosaurs loom over the viewer, Bigfoot is finally found, animals jump out of carved logs, a troll hides under a bridge, a great sturgeon that was once caught in French Lake is caught once again, and an alien named Zola calls out for you to take a photo with them.


Road
OPEN

Robin speaks about staying busy while having fun, local storytelling, education through art, environmentalism, and the value of being a self-taught artist with a broad practice. Through Robin's informal training and firsthand experience as a frequent museum attendee, he creates art that can be easily experienced, touched, shared, and understood. Our conversation took place over a phone call on January 12th, 2026.

Eli King (EK): ***What inspired the garden and gallery?***

Robin Hanson (RH): I think it's my love for art? And I've always been that creative person who likes to study and research and have significant challenges. So it's great fun for me. Art tells a story, art grabs you emotionally, and for me, you can paint or sculpt the 7 wonders of the world, but I like my world that's close at hand.

EK: ***Is art making your primary occupation?***

RH: No, I have always been able to draw or carve or do anything like that very, very easily. But no, I am an entrepreneur and a business person who has done fairly well in life, and so playing the game of being an artist is great fun and of great interest. Like, I do sell a fair bit of paintings. But if I were just an artist, I would be that starving artist. But I have done well, that's why I can build an art gallery out here in the backwoods of New Brunswick.

EK: ***In a recent radio interview with CBC, you stated that the diversity of sculptural mediums in your practice, wood, concrete, epoxy and fiberglass, clay and bronze, comes from a need to stay busy and continue to meet challenges. Could you elaborate on that?***

RH: Usually, I get up around 5:30 in the morning, and I have to start. Say, "get at it," and be doing something. And when you get to be seventy-seven, I don't do heavy physical work anymore. But I will go all day long, and I usually shut down about ten o'clock. I like all forms of art; it's almost a mission for me to explore the many different mediums that are out there just to see if I can do it and to see if I can conquer it. I'm always on the search for something new and challenging. I recall a CBC interview with Bruno Bobak,[1] an artist and resident for UNB [University of New Brunswick], and in the interview, he was asked if he had any regrets in his art career and he said "Yes, I really have a regret and that is I have always been a painter and I really would have liked to try sculpting." When I heard that, I was influenced, and I said, "I have just got to do sculpting," and so that sent me on a journey.

1 CBC interview with Bruno Bobak conducted in 2002. www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/legendary-war-artist-bruno-bobak-dies-at-age-88-1.1245909

EK: ***I also heard in your CBC interview that you inherited this need to stay busy from your father, and I saw the family tree totem pole in the garden. Could you elaborate on how your family history is reflected in your art making?***

RH: I think that it has been a part of the family's DNA to always be working and creating something; you could say my father was a workaholic. He wasn't one that could sit idly by and watch a television program. He had to be doing something with his hands, always had to have a mission. I have to be kept busy, and what easier way to be busy than to jump into the art world? In the art world, you can be creative, let your imagination go wherever it wants to go, and I love art projects that have a story to tell, whether it's trying to save the planet or taking up a cause that needs to be shown or discussed. You only have so much time on this Earth to do all that you can do. That's just my DNA.

EK: ***So your work is in response to vacancies in history and other recognitions more broadly?***

RH: [Art] serves as a great purpose for me, I guess. I'm always the person that looks for causes, whether it's history or heritage, or the environment, and I use art for that. I read the book by John Boyko on RB Bennett,[2] the only prime minister to come from New Brunswick. And after reading that, I was taken aback that RB Bennett did such an incredible job as prime minister, in the depression. And he never afforded a statue to be [put] on Parliament Hill. He was a very wealthy man, and he gave away pretty well his entire fortune, and we, as a nation, couldn't put up a statue of RB Bennett. I was offended at that, so I created a statue. Eight feet tall, and I donated it to the government of Canada. I just felt, as a New Brunswicker, I had to honor that man. He had given so much even to New Brunswick, to the universities, churches, and anonymously.

EK: ***I did read that you preserved some local land that you inherited, near the sculpture garden.***

RH: I had over 400 acres of unique habitat, and I wanted to take and preserve that. So, I've created the Hanson Nature Preserve, and we opened that up this year. It's an incredible nature preserve. It has the Oromocto River, and it has ponds. It has old growth forest. It's all free of charge to go and is bringing humans together, and this year we put in a bird watching tower. I think in our first month we had over a thousand visitors. And maybe [visitors] will visit the art gallery, the nature preserve is only a kilometer and a half away. It's important to preserve and have fun doing that.

2 *Bennett: The Rebel Who Challenged and Changed a Nation*.

Robin Hanson, dinosaur sculptures in front of the Hanson Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, between entrance of gallery (to left out of frame) and entrance to garden (to right out of frame), 2025.

EK: ***So the sculpture garden, the gallery, and the nature preserve are all very closely related projects for you. Do you feel they are all part of the same experience?***

RH: Yes, and no. I think one of the key things is education. I think a big part of my artwork is education. And when we go to the Nature Preserve, that's also education. I think that when you start to get old, you think about your final days of living. And I really want to try to do the best I can, I guess. To help nature, and help history and heritage. Yeah, for me, it's all good fun.

EK: ***You've stated you have no formal training. Do you consider yourself a folk artist, an outsider, to be working with vernacular themes?***

RH: I'm no outsider, and I do like artwork that shows and tells of local history or heritage. I find it very easy to draw, paint, and sculpt. Without formal training, there is a significant challenge to do great artworks. When you stand alone in the art world, much is learned by trial and error. It is absolutely wonderful to have someone teach you an art form and help you along the way; it can save considerable time and learning by trial and error. However, I don't mind trial and error; I have developed techniques that I have seen nowhere else, not in the academia world, so there's sometimes a benefit to trial and error.

But I'm not a great artist. I could be if I took a lot more time in my paintings. Or even in sculptures. But I've had the opportunity to rub shoulders with some artists that have their PhDs, and they have a whole bunch of accolades, you know? And some of them, I noticed, just do not have the talent, but by golly, they have that love for art and wanting to do art and express themselves in art. And that's great, you're having fun and enjoying yourself.

EK: ***Does this status or culture inform the themes you focus on or the way you display your work?***

RH: Culture does play a big part in my art world. I love the local history that I have a passion to research and record, almost like before it's gone, it got to be captured.

EK: ***What do you look at when you are doing research?***

RH: I just bounce everywhere. I went to Africa in 2013 to witness the great migrations, and when I was in Tanzania, I had the opportunity to see the last white rhinos on Earth. So when I get back here to French Lake, I went to my photos, and I did a sculpture of the white rhino. Why would I feature a white rhino? Here in French Lake, it would have very little effect on trying to help and save that species. But six or eight months ago, there was an article, and it talked about the white rhinos in Tanzania. That it was going to be the end of the species. I have tried to tell that story that we've got to take and try to protect and preserve our animals that are in danger of being extinct.

EK: ***How do you think about your gallery and garden in relation to larger art institutions, such as the nearby Beaverbrook Art Gallery?***

RH: I had Tom Smart[3] from the Beaverbrook Art Gallery [in Fredricton, New Brunswick] come here and do a lecture, and when he came into the gallery, he looked around, and he said, "Robin, I had no idea that you had so many artists displayed here and so many different styles of artists," and I said, "Tom, these are all mine. These are all my paintings and all my sculptures. I'm the only one featured here," and he was really surprised and impressed.

But I think that the Beaverbrook Art Gallery is absolutely incredible. I love going there and looking at the paintings of the old masters every chance I get. If I'm away, I love to visit art galleries, like the national art galleries.

EK: ***Do you see a separation between the work that you tend to see in those spaces and the work that you make?***

RH: My philosophy is to create art that can be easily shared and understood. I recall visiting a very famous art gallery in Washington, they had a very large sculpture garden, and one of the sections of the sculpture garden was abstract with big steel pillars and all kinds of art that would make you say, "What is that?"

And as I walked through that sculpture garden, there were signs everywhere you could not be closer than 20 feet from an exhibit, there were no storyboards [didactics] to describe those particular pieces of art, and I felt what a shame that the effort that was put into that wasn't really shared; you can't touch it, sit on it.

3 Tom Smart was the curator at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery from 1989 to 1997 and returned to serve as the gallery's director in 2017, retiring in 2024.

I felt like if I was to have a sculpture garden, that it would be shared. You could have self-guided tours with storyboards so that the guest would understand the purpose of the sculpture.

Whether it be the great sturgeon that was caught here or a white rhino. You could have physical contact with it - you could climb on the sculptures. I like to make people happy.

EK: ***The garden is self-guided and by donation only, and it seems you encourage interaction and play. Is this accessibility an integral part of your work?***

RH: I use part of the policy, or the guidelines, from Norway and Sweden. They make a significant effort to have their visitors really connected to the art. I've worked with the insurance company, so you can go around here with a wheelchair, and nothing is above five feet, so kids can climb on the rocks. I do not feel outside the art world; I feel that I am different, and my guests seem to like what I have done. My art is for everyone, from the very young to the very old. There is absolutely something for everyone.

EK: ***So, in a way, you're recreating historical and natural artifacts but outside of a museum sort of setting, which allows people to interact with the artifacts in a way that they wouldn't otherwise be able to.***

RH: I'm just now doing an eight-foot sculpture of the Eiffel Tower. I just started that a couple of weeks ago. When my wife and I celebrated our 25th anniversary, we went on a tour to France. In Paris, we went to the Eiffel Tower. In two more years will be our 50th wedding anniversary, and I told my wife, "I'm getting ahead. I can't take you to the Eiffel Tower again, but maybe I can bring the Eiffel Tower to you." I like doing fun projects like that.

EK: ***When displaying your art, whether in the garden or the gallery, do you feel the individual pieces or the message/feeling conveyed by their being seen together is more important?***

RH: Displaying is sharing, I think that displaying art, the more pieces the merrier. I have friends that paint only one theme. It happened to be wild geese, and that person has produced hundreds of white geese paintings, and she just loves it, but for me, I look at all the possibilities, all the different styles, and all the challenges. I can never be a one-themed artist.

EK: ***Do you identify your work with the term "artist-built environment?"***

RH: I would say so, yes, it has meaning to me. I don't know if you noticed when you went to the gallery last year, but I had a big giant dragonfly. The dragonfly population is diminishing, and they don't know why. And so, Ducks Unlimited did a program on dragonflies,[4] and so I thought that I would by hanging [the dragonfly] from the ceiling, bring attention to the plight of dragonflies. That's just meaningful, fun to do.

EK: ***You've said that your visitors enjoy the way in which you present your art. Do visitors seem to see what you intend them to see in your work?***

RH: Oh my Heavens yes! We have received so many letters and comments. Just makes you feel. on the top of the world, you know? And that does give you encouragement, you are connecting with people. It's good fun!

EK: ***I think viewers of your work can tell that you're having fun making it. Especially in some of the more funny and imaginative sculptures that I wanted to ask you about, like the troll under the bridge and the big alien "Zola."***

RH: Yeah, those are just fun things, and we need fantasy in our lives, too. And imagination, Oh my golly, just the photographs that are taken! They have a significant part to play in the art here in the sculpture garden.

Zola is an alien from outer space; I just love to tell the story of how she arrived here in French Lake. The statue of the troll goes along with an incredible story of the trolls of Sand Brook Falls. Fantasy stirs the imagination, and it is just fun art. It's kind of fun too to connect a story with a particular piece of art. You have to have fantasy, I think. Like Disney said, "You gotta make them cry, and you gotta make them laugh."

EK: ***How much involvement do the community and visitors have in the further development of your work?***

RH: I just finished a little while ago a sculpture of a silverback gorilla. I did that because when COVID came, sports got pretty well wiped out in our area. Except we had a Hall of Famer in baseball create a whole program, called the Silverback Program. In that Silverback Program, there are a number of teams, particularly girls' teams. So I have a full-size gorilla with the baseball bat in one hand and a ball in the other. So I will donate that to the Silverback girls. We've had some of them come here where they got their picture taken with this great big gorilla.

4 Project Dragonfly; Ducks Unlimited Canada. www.ducks.ca/project-dragonfly.

(To Left), Robin Hanson, *Bridge Troll*. Hanson Sculpture Garden, 2025.
(To Right), Robin Hanson, *Zola the Alien*. Hanson Sculpture Garden, 2025.

(Above), Robin Hanson, Horror film themed display on great pandemics with accompanying didactics. Hanson Sculpture Garden (2025).
(Below), Robin Hanson, sculptural recreation of record breaking sturgeon caught in French Lake, New Brunswick. Hanson Sculpture Garden, 2025.

EK: ***Why do you think people are interested in your work?***

RH: I'm of a different character. Look, I have not made any great effort to advertise my artwork. I have so many paintings I could probably supply three or four or more art galleries. But it's not a panic for me to sell my artwork. In fact, sometimes I just don't want to sell it. I just want to keep it because it has, in most cases, a lot of meaning. It's a fun experience for our guests to visit over ninety sculptures that are unique and different from any place else on earth. I think the general public is interested in my work because it's very unique and displays a lot of variety. For many people, it is an absolute surprise to find such an art venue in the backwoods of New Brunswick.

EK: ***Where do you see the garden, gallery, and your work going in the future?***

RH: I will keep expanding the art exhibits as long as I live. I recognize that the end for me is coming. Many of the paintings that are historical will be given to towns and villages of the local area, and nature paintings that bring attention to species at risk will be donated to non-profit organizations for fundraising or promotion.

Robin Hanson, Griffin and orca sculptures in foreground. Trail winding around garden in background. Hanson Sculpture Garden, 2025.

Robin Hanson is a French Lake, New Brunswick, artist, entrepreneur, and environmental advocate, as well as the founder of both the Hanson Gallery and Sculpture Garden, and the nearby Oromocto watershed. Previously, he and his wife, Roblynn, ran their own small business, Roblynn Home Hardware Building Centre. His business is now under the ownership and management of his daughter, and Robin continues to be a prolific sculptor and painter, filling his gallery and garden with his distinctive work. Robin's work can also be seen throughout his local community. In 2012, Robin received the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Award for Outstanding Contribution to Canada.

Robin Hanson, Star Wars' "Yoda" inspired works. From left to right, *Gugly*, *Yoda*, and *Yodell*. Hanson Sculpture Garden, 2025.

Robin Hanson, *Fort French Lake Trading Post*, side view. A regional history inspired children's play structure. Hanson Sculpture Garden, 2025.

Robin Hanson, *Fort French Lake Trading Post*, front view with bear sculpture. Hanson Sculpture Garden. (2025).

Robin Hanson, Hanson family totem pole, crowned with robin sculpture and nest. Hanson Sculpture Garden. (2025).

NOVA S

Canada's Ocean

TOURIST INFORMATION

(Provided by Province of Nova Scotia)

The Nova Scotia Travel Bureau of the Government of Nova Scotia maintains a complete travel information service for visitors and residents at the following points of entry:

- Amherst—*Route 2 at New Brunswick Line*
- Yarmouth—*At Steamship Terminal, Main Street*
- Digby—*Montague Row*
- Caribou—*At Intersection ½ mile from Northumberland Ferry Dock*
- Port Hastings—*At Causeway Terminal*
- North Sydney—*Queen Street*

For last minute information visit the Bureau at the place where you enter Nova Scotia.

Nova Scotia travel information service is also given at the following Nova Scotia Information Offices: Hotel Dorset, 30 W. 54 St., New York 19, N.Y.; 607 Boylston St., Boston, Mass.; 43 Eglinton Ave. E., Toronto 12, Ont.; in the Canadian National's Central Station in Montreal and on board the "M. V. Bluenose," Bar Harbour, Maine—Yarmouth, Nova Scotia.

O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V

SCOTIA

n Playground

TOURIST INFORMATION

(Provided by municipal authorities)

In addition to the Province of Nova Scotia tourist information bureaus, many communities (through the local government, Board of Trade, etc.) maintain tourist information bureaus in the summer months. Here visitors can get advice on local attractions and activities, and get help with accommodation. In 1964 the following communities provided this service:

Amherst
Antigonish
Baddeck
Bridgetown
Bridgewater
Chester
Dartmouth
Halifax: Bell Road
Head of Jeddore
Kentville
Liverpool
Lunenburg
Mahone Bay
Meteghan (Clare District)
Middleton
New Glasgow
Parrsboro
Shelburne
Sydney
Tatamagouche
Truro
Windsor
Wolfville
Yarmouth

O P Q R S T U V


19

Charles MacDonald Concrete House Museum

Centreville, Nova Scotia, Canada

Artist-built environments are integral facets of their often rural communities. A representation of the vernacular, these do-it-yourself enterprises display a unique and tangible archive of their community's history in a way otherwise unimaginable: as an accessible composite art environment with a unique vision. The Charles MacDonald Concrete House Museum in Centreville, Nova Scotia, stands as an example of how, although almost definitionally fragile and ephemeral, these built spaces can be preserved as museums and public spaces that stand as a testament to community care and labour.

Charles "Charlie" MacDonald was a Nova Scotian tradesman, socialist activist, and folk artist, painting landscapes and everyday Maritime scenes, as well as innovating in concrete sculpture. Although a prolific painter and sculptor, Charlie never directly profited from his art, except for a short stint as a sign painter in British Columbia. In 1912, Charlie built the beginnings of his concrete house as a one-room concrete factory for his Kentville Concrete Company, which he ran as a social enterprise.[1] It was only later that the factory was moved and the house was converted into a home. Before the addition of the small living space, Charlie camped in a tent on the roof of the factory. A second story was built in 1916, with the help of his new wife, Mabel.

The two continued to push the boundaries of concrete construction in the creation of unique concrete cabinets, shelves, a bathtub, a decorative hearth, a birdhouse, and life-sized figural sculptures. Over time, Charlie adorned the yard with his sculptures and decorated the interior with paintings and concrete reliefs. Mabel, a skilled rug hooker, crafted rugs that decorated the walls and warmed the home. In later years, Charlie's paintings and Mabel's rugs were frequent gifts to friends and family. Charlie lived in the house until he passed away in 1967, and Mabel continued to live there until her passing in 1981.

Recognizing the historical significance of the property, the Charles Macdonald Concrete House of Centreville Society was formed in 1995, beginning the house's operation as a museum. Between March 2020 and February 2025, the all-volunteer board, headed by Terry Havlis Drahos and Kevin West, dedicated itself to a much-needed restoration effort to revitalize and ensure the house's future. The house and its grounds continue to exhibit Charlie and Mabel MacDonald's unique work, as well as organizing temporary exhibits of work by contemporary artists.

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1 MacDonald ran his company, Kentville Concrete products, under the concept of "'production for use, not for profit.' It was ran co-operatively…for the general benefit of all the workers, according to former foreman Bob Ferris, the men 'drew what we needed.'" www.communitystories.ca

Terry and Kevin provide insight into the running of a living micromuseum and historic artist-built environment at a pivotal crossroads, as well as speaking to Charlie and Mabel MacDonald's legacy, the power of collaborative projects and community outreach, and the affordances of creative problem-solving. Our conversation took place over a group Microsoft Teams video call on January 14th, 2026.

Eli King (EK): ***Can you go a bit into both your backgrounds, what led to your interest in the Charles MacDonald House, and what inspired you to volunteer your time to the organization?***

Kevin West (KW): My exposure to the house came from running an illegal gambling operation. Yeah, I'll explain that. They were having a fundraiser golf game, and I was asked to come to be part of the entertainment fundraising after the game. Basically, it was like a Parcheesi game that people bet on, like a dollar a bet, and half the money from the bet went to the winner of the game, and the other half went to the organization. So that was my first real exposure with the house, and then, after that, I was asked to be a member of the society. I liked the story, you know, I like the art. And then I became a member of the board, and then I was the chairperson of the board for a long period of time [20 years]. And yeah, it was fun, then I recruited Terry.

THD: I met Kevin a long, long time ago. I started a public art project in the county where we artists installed art installations all over the county, out in nature, for people to find. That organization was called Uncommon Common Art.[2] And we formed a relationship with the Charles MacDonald House because we had some crossover philosophies, and Kevin was always a participating artist in this annual art exhibit, and for many years, we did an installation at the Concrete House.

Then, in 2019, I closed that organization and needed some place to put my energy. I had worked with Kevin for many years, so I joined the Charles MacDonald board. That was in February of 2020, which turned out to be an ominous month. And we sat down, and I think there were myself and two other new board members, it was like this kind of a turnover at that point, of the board. And the first thing on the agenda at the first meeting I was at was whether to sell or save the concrete house, because at that point, I think if a building inspector would have walked in, they would have put tape across the doors and said you can't come in here anymore. It was ready to basically just collapse in on itself.

So we all collectively did some research, and we decided that we wanted to try to save it. Which was really, really, really, really hard.

2 Conceptualized by Terry Havlis-Drahos, Uncommon Common Art (UCA) was launched in the summer of 2008 and occurred annually in Kings County, Nova Scotia until 2019. The project placed installation art throughout the rural community in an effort to engage and educate the community in art, environmental advocacy, and creativity. grapevinepublishing.ca/4800/ten-years-of-uncommon-common-art

And so over the struggle of saving it, we all kind of grew to be closer. We had this big project and lots of battles. Kevin, for the past three years, it's not so much that you've been the chairperson and I've been the vice chair.

EK: ***You said that the public art project you were doing before you joined the board of The Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society was called Uncommon Common Art? That's also something that Charles MacDonald is called often, isn't it? "The uncommon common man?"***

THD: There was an exhibit at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia,[3] and in the write-ups, they referred to him as "the uncommon common man." That was one of the commonalities that we had, I had no idea at the time. In fact, I didn't even name it. Somebody else named it. So that's just a coincidence or happenstance that happened.

EK: ***So, in the recent restoration effort to save the house, what all had to be changed structurally to develop it into the museum it is today?***

THD: It has been a museum since its [the Society's] inception in '96. But God, there was not anything we did not have to do. We had to completely disassemble and rebuild the ceiling on the second floor. All of that had to be redone from literally the ceiling, the rafters, the roof, all was reconstructed and redesigned in a way. It looks the same from the outside, but it's redesigned.

KW: [To begin with,] we took a year, and we went through it and figured out what had to be done. Who could do it and how much it would cost, so that we could develop a budget, because we need a budget to ask for funding. We spent the year talking to architects, engineers, and contractors, and everybody just to sort of get a sense of what had to be done. Cause it's a concrete house that's almost one hundred years old, and it's funky. So it was nothing that fit into any model. The original house had a concrete roof, and a flat or sloped concrete roof. So all the underpinnings, all the lumber that was holding that up, was deteriorating, and the roof weighs around twenty-five thousand pounds. So, how do you deal with a twenty-five-thousand-pound slab of concrete that's held up?

THD: And the first estimates we got were one and a half million dollars. And we were like, holy crap, it's a small community. Usually, for funding a project like that, you can ask the federal government for half. You might be able to get twenty-percent from your provincial government and maybe ten or fifteen-percent from your local government, but that still leaves a big chunk of change for us, the organization, to come up with.

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3 *Charles MacDonald: Seaman, Labourer, Artist, Manufacturer (1874-1967)*. Curated by Patrick Condon Laurette at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. Ran from Oct. 24th through Dec. 10th, 1980.

And we had to do a lot of soul searching on that because we really came to the conclusion that the house was not worth one and a half million dollars, and one of the things we always kind of go back to is “What would Charlie and Mabel do?” Like, we really try to think carefully about that.

We came to the conclusion that Charlie MacDonald would not approve of spending that kind of money to save his house, whether it was federal money or local money. And so we kind of revisited all of the problems with the house in a way that Charlie would have looked at them. From a creative problem-solving angle, as opposed to just architects and traditional methods.

We found a great contractor [Tate Graves] and a great building engineer [Larry Honey] who thought like we did, you know, in their problem-solving. We could not have done it without them.. Larry donated all of his work, like fifteen thousand dollar’s worth of work. Just both of those people really understood that this house and solving its problems had to be looked at from a different angle, and so we did it for half [of the initial quote].

KW: Having a good contractor and a good engineer who knew each other, who could talk, they got on the same page right off the bat. Tate, the contractor, saying “OK, why don’t we do it this way? You’ll see, you’ll achieve the same goal, and less money.” So, having our contractor knowing that we’re on a really tight budget and trying to fit within that budget. We didn’t cut corners, but we were able to just think outside the box on stuff.

> **EK:** ***I saw that there were some out there, but quite impactful decisions were made in the renovations. Like the skylight in the Hazlewood Gallery section that looks up into Charlie’s old chinchilla coop in the attic.***

KW: That was their idea, Larry and Tate came up with that. Saying, you know, “why don’t we just put a plexiglass window in there, and then you can see a bit.”

THD: And we always really worked as a team. Because there was a stairwell there [where the skylight is now]. And I brought up the idea, you know, I remember asking Larry, “Will this stand up if we take this all out?” And he was like, “Yeah,” because it opened up that whole room. You could really see the story. And then it was Tate’s idea not to cover up the [original, roughly textured] walls. There were lots of challenges, but the group working on it was really great, group projects can go south really fast, but it was all really positive.

Skylight view of attic, formerly a chinchilla coop in Hazelwood Gallery. MacDonald Concrete House Museum, 2025.

Mid-renovation view of uncovered painting on concrete walls, second floor of MacDonald Concrete House Museum, 2024. (Courtesy of the Charles MacDonald House of Centreville Society).

MacDonald Gallery with *The Trophy Buck* and other assorted MacDonald concrete sculptures. MacDonald Concrete House Museum, 2025.

EK: ***As you mentioned, in 1980 the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (AGNS) had an exhibition of MacDonald's work. Around the same period, in 1984, the Maud Lewis house was purchased by the provincial government from a local preservationist society so it could be dismantled and eventually reconstituted to be put on permanent display at the AGNS.***[4]

How and to what effect do you think the MacDonald house has been preserved? What do you feel was the effect of MacDonald's work being viewed in the context of this major art gallery versus how it continues to be viewed in the MacDonald House?

THD: The province of Nova Scotia has really taken Maud Lewis's artwork and really used it to promote the province. Across the world, you know. There's that movie[5] made about her, and that really took off, and there's a lot of really good things about that. People know Nova Scotia, maybe because of Maud Lewis, and they're familiar with folk art; not everybody's familiar with folk art. It's not everybody's thing.

But the flip side is it's all about Maud Lewis, and they often don't look beyond her at all the other amazing folk artists from that [time and the province] that were making stuff. It's just her particular type of artwork is very accessible, you know, for everyday people. It's very happy, it's very easy to understand. It works really well to promote.

The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia did that thing in '80, and they've not done anything else about [MacDonald]. The only thing that they've done about Charles MacDonald since then was I worked in collaboration with the Art Gallery to develop a lesson plan for schools with them. But that's it. Like, there's a lot of Harold Cromwell, we did an exhibit.[6] But, there's a lot of other [Nova Scotian folk artists]. It's not Maud Lewis' fault, but she seems to take up all the space and also defines what folk art is.

So sometimes in the course of trying to fundraise and get people to know about the concrete house, it's a little frustrating cause everyone knows about the Maud Lewis house, but I'm like, "Come and look at this [the MacDonald] house! 'Cause this house is pretty cool!"

KW: One of the reasons why the [MacDonald 1980] show was at the Art Gallery was that the director of the Nova Scotia Art Gallery was folk art-friendly. And there were people on the board who knew Bernie Reardon, and they were artists too. So there was a connection there, and so he was open to having Charlie's work. Current people in control don't seem to see folk art as a big enough issue anymore.

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4 Hamilton, Laurie, Craig Dix, and Jennifer McLaughlin. *The Painted House of Maud Lewis: Conserving a Folk Art Treasure,* (Goose Lane Editions), 2001.

5 *Maudie* (2016), directed by Aisling Walsh.

6 *Harold & Charles: Artists Out of the Mainstream,* at the Charles MacDonald House Museum. Ran from July 21st through Aug. 31st, 2024.

EK: ***I think there's something important about how the MacDonald House is still a fixture of the community in its original location. Even if it's maybe not as recognized as it could be.***

KW: Yep, people refer to it as a hidden treasure. They'll sort of come across it, like, "Wow, this is really great, didn't know this was here."

Charles Macdonald, *Bathing Woman* installed on grounds outside of MacDonald Conrete House Museum entrance, 2025.

THD: I think [Maud's house] is more akin to the blue cottages. They are super amazing. The fairy cottages there. There were five, there's only four left, particularly [of note] are the red cottage and the blue cottage. Our organization owns the blue cottage, and Charlie's nephew, Fred, owns the red cottage. And then there's two others. They are made of concrete and beach rocks, like big round beach rocks, like he constructed the walls. There's nothing straight; there's not a square angle.

KW: The cottages were built as a make-work project. During the First World War, the Kentville Concrete Company did really well. They were the only people that made concrete. There was a demand for concrete. After the war, the Depression came, and there was nothing. All construction, anything around the business, just went dormant, as most businesses did. But because he ran the Kentville Concrete Company as a social enterprise, basically, people didn't get paid a wage. At the end of the week, they went, and they asked, and they got money that they needed to hold them over.

Charlie and Mabel owned the property at Huntington's Point, and they would go over there camping. So Charlie said, "Well, you know, we have some money, I have workers who are not earning anything. So we'll go over there, and I'll employ them to build cottages." It was a make-work project that kept his employees employed during times of the Depression when there was no work.

THD: I think Charlie and his work had a particular, you know, community philosophy. He's this active socialist, and he really had a lot to say about how things should be. I think he's more akin to some southern folk artists. Like Howard Finster, he's out of northern Georgia, and he built this place out of concrete and found objects, a place called Paradise Garden.[7] And he [Howard Finster] was like a preacher.

So he was kind of like Charlie in that he had something to say, like he had something to say to the community or to the world. So they had a crossover like that, and also they made things out of concrete and found objects. So I think there's some other folk artists that are a little bit more like Charlie than maybe Maud. I think Harold Cromwell is a lot like Charlie in that he was depicting rural life, you know, and sometimes telling a story within his drawings and paintings and stuff.

7 Paradise Garden is in Summerville, Georgia. The project was built by folk artist and Baptist minister Howard Finster from 1960 through his death in 2001. The garden is now owned by Chattooga County and operated by Paradise Gardens Park & Museum, Inc. www.paradisegardenfoundation.org

(Upper Left), MacDonald Concrete House Museum, view from behind, 2025.
(Lower Left), Maud Lewis Painted House, as installed in the Maud Lewis Scotiabank Gallery, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. On permanent display. 2025.
(Top Right), MacDonald Blue Cottage, Huntington Point, Nova Scotia, 2024.
(Courtesy of the Charles MacDonald House of Centreville Society).

EK: ***The Charles MacDonald House seems divergent/individual in its operation and exhibition design, operating as a gallery, sculpture garden, and heritage site. How do you think about the museum's place in relation to other historical houses and art museums?***

KW: Well, we're definitely different, we're the odd duck. Other museums have artifacts, enormous historical artifacts. You know, they're just stuffed full of artifacts that people just drop off. All our artifacts are related to Charlie.

THD: We're more unique, there's a lot of the little community historic museums all over this province. And let me tell you, I love them. I love them all. When I travel, I look for these kinds of things. I'm really into it. But a lot of the museums, the community history museums all over Nova Scotia, they're old houses. Like the Randall House,[8] they're well-preserved old houses, but there were like a whole bunch of houses that looked like that, or they're old lighthouses. There's a lot of community museums that are in old lighthouses, or adjacent to old lighthouses, and there were lots of lighthouses. Whereas the concrete house is completely unique. There is nothing even close to it. Like, there's not another concrete house in Nova Scotia that's a community museum, you know, the closest you would get would be the bottle houses.[9]

EK: ***The gallery and grounds display contemporary artists as well as works from the MacDonald archive. What artistic practices tend to fit the MacDonald house's mandate, are local artists prioritized?***

THD: That's a really good question because for the past five years, we have been so caught up with restoring the building, and for a lot of that time, the Hazelwood Gallery, where we exhibited, was non-functioning. So those are the kind of things we're putting together now. We really don't have an answer to that, and we're kind of figuring that out.

KW: Pre-renovation, Charlie's work was displayed in the main house and then in the Hazelwood Gallery. We displayed visiting work, and we'd have local artists. We had sculpture and paintings, and photography. Our thing at that time was that if we had contemporary art that people would come, and they would then see the house. But no, there isn't anything written down as to what we show.

THD: We're open to suggestions at this point. I figured out the shows that have been there the past two summers, I'm involved with other arts organizations in the province, and because of my work with Uncommon Common Art, I'm connected to artists all over the province, and I just kind of tapped into that to fill the June, July, and August slots.

8 The Randall House Museum is a late eighteenth-century, two-and-one-half storey, wooden Georgian style farmhouse located in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. www.wolfvillehs.ednet.ns.ca

9 The Bottle Houses and Gardens *(Maisons de bouteilles et Jardins)* is in Wellington, Prince Edward Island. Hannah's Bottle Village is in Point Prim, Prince Edward Island.

We had Holly Worthington, who did the cyanotype photography exhibit,[10] and she's from Maine, and she just happened to stay at the concrete house and liked it. We liked her, and we're like, "Yeah, let's do a show." I have no idea what we're doing this Summer and that's up for discussion at our next meeting. We don't really have a set mandate for [the Hazelwood] gallery. The other thing is it's a rural place. We don't have any money to pay artists. So we kind of have to take what we can get sometimes. I wrote a grant to get the Harold Cromwell exhibit, and that was great. But then I didn't write a grant this year. I don't have something in mind. So we'll just see what happens.

EK: ***The house seems pretty open to broad kinds of art. On my visit, even in the grounds, you had those folk art automatons.***

THD: Those are Kevin's. Yeah, he made them. He made them for Uncommon Common Art, and now they live there.

EK: ***…and you had the 'Apple Obscura.'***

THD: [That was by] Onya Hogan-Finlay, she emailed me because she had heard about Uncommon Common Art. She had just moved to the province, and she was talking to other artists, and they told her about me, and then she emailed me, and I said, "Hey, why don't you do it here?" And she said, "OK." I mean, that's kind of how half of it works. The shows that we put on, a lot of it is just finding people, people coming into our lives, you know, talking to folks. It's very organic.

EK: ***You seem to be able to situate the work well to be in dialogue with MacDonald's work, which is sort of definitional of the space, like the whole house is sort of a composite artwork of his.***

THD: Conversations and relationships. That's kind of how everything happens. Even the building, you know, the restoration kind of happened that way, which is nice. It's the nice thing about small towns.

10 *Inspired by Blue,* a solo exhibition of Holly Worthington cyanotypes, tintypes, lumen prints, solargraphs, etc. Created while Worthington was in residence at the MacDonald Blue Cottage. On display in the Hazelwood Gallery, Charles MacDonald House Museum, from Aug. 3rd through Aug. 31st, 2025.

Kevin West, *Centreville Socialists*, 2017. Folk art automata installed on grounds of MacDonald Concrete House Museum, 2025.

Onya Hogan-Finlay, *Apple Obscura*, 2022. Inflatable camera obscura hung from apple wood ladder, MacDonald concrete deer (to right) and cougar (to left) in background. Installed on grounds of MacDonald Concrete House Museum, 2025.

EK: ***There was a hooked rug exhibit[11] during my visit. As well as being a popular cultural practice in the area, hooking rugs was specifically a practice of Mabel MacDonald's, who outlived her husband and lived in the house by herself for a number of years. What is Mabel's influence on the museum?***

THD: Yeah, we try to incorporate her, you know, more and more. It's Charlie and Mabel or Mabel and Charlie. We don't have as much of her work as we do of Charlie's. Kevin, what happened to her work?

KW: They just sort of made stuff, and they just sort of gave it away. I don't think either one of them sold any of their work. So we don't have that much. There is the one piece that's in the [collection of the] University of New Brunswick.

THD: We more and more try to make it about Charlie and Mabel because they definitely did all this together. They got married in Kentville in the Winter and walked to Centerville to the house. And they lived in a tent on the roof because at that time it was just a factory, a one-story factory. And they, Mabel and Charlie, built that second floor. Hauling buckets of cement up, you know, with a pulley. If you look closely at some of the pictures, Mabel's like a head taller than Charlie. She was a strapping woman. And so I'm betting that she did just as much of the physical labor as he did in putting that thing together. They were really a team.

KW: I don't think he could have done all that without Mabel. Charlie was very opinionated and didn't suffer fools lightly, you know. He didn't like politicians or speculators or people like that. Mabel was the softer side of them. She made the cookies for the kids, and they both were really concerned about people being able to read. They both taught people to read.

THD: They're like a yin and a yang, you know, within the community. I'm sure she was smoothing over ruffled feathers. He was an interesting guy; he was prickly.

So we do try to [incorporate Mabel] in a lot of our new stuff. It's just a lot of Charlie and Mabel. That was one of the reasons to do the rug hooking exhibit, because then we could highlight Mabel's work. That was a good fit because she's a Nova Scotia folk artist too. That's often overlooked.

11 *One for Sorrow, Two for Joy,* an exhibition of hooked rugs by Ellen Gould Sullivan and Mabel MacDonald, with workshops from Lynn Denney. On display in the Hazelwood Gallery and MacDonald Gallery, Charles MacDonald House Museum. Ran from July 6th through July 31st, 2025.

(Above), Mable and Charles MacDonald in front of the MacDonald Teapot House, circa 1930. (Courtesy of the Charles MacDonald House of Centreville Society).
(Below), view of *One for Sorrow, Two for Joy* in Hazelwood Gallery. An exhibition of hooked rugs by Ellen Gould Sullivan and Mabel MacDonald, 2025.

EK: ***So we spoke about it a little bit before, but the museum draws a fairly wide-ranging audience, including a lot of local visitors who might not frequent other arts institutions. And people from great distances being a relatively remote museum. How does this shape how you think about the museum and the community it represents?***

THD: I think that when we were doing this restoration, we really tried to keep in mind the local community. That this was their place, because Charlie and Mabel were super invested in the local community. In fact, after Mabel died, they willed property to the community.

KW: They just donated it to the village. A large recreational area right adjacent to the museum,[12] it has ball fields and soccer fields.

THD: Unfortunately, a lot of people that live there now don't know that. That story is a bit lost, but it was really key that this museum or this house belongs to the community and that the community should always feel welcomed there. They should feel like it's theirs, their space. So we really work to never [alienate them].

Museums can be intimidating spaces to go into. And for people, maybe older people, that live in a rural [area], they are like, "Oh, I don't want to go there. That's not for me; that's for somebody else." So we really try to break down that barrier by going back to "What would Charlie and Mabel do?" Our Summer students [volunteers] are very down to earth, and you know, they make cookies on Wednesday, so it's just trying to get that whole vibe.

KW: And we don't charge an admission. We're one of the few museums that do not charge an admission because we thought that that's not something that Charlie and Mabel would want. So you can make a donation. We actually do OK with the donations rather than charging an admission fee. We want everybody to be able to come into the house, you know, whether you have money or not.

THD: Right, and a lot of our programming that we did last year [was free]. We did do two or three artist-run workshops that you had to pay for, but the vast majority of our programming is free to the public. We have music events, and we have arts and crafts for children.

The people from away, you know, that just kind of happens. That's where social media and things like this [interview] kind of get the word out. Which is so hard to [reach], you know, the wider world. But being on Atlas Obscura or, like I said, just social media. The website, all that. But we serve, we're all about the community first. I think if you do that, and you do that genuinely, the rest will follow.

12 Centreville Recreation Park. Centreville, Nova Scotia.

KW: Also, having those three automaton pieces out in the yard, people come by [to look], and then they come in [the house]. Or they visit those [outdoor spaces] and then they bring the kids, or they'll bring somebody to have a look at the [house and grounds]. We don't lock up the grounds at night. We have picnic tables outside so people can use that. We want the grounds to be open seven days a week so the community can come here.

EK: ***So accessibility, community building, and education initiatives are central to the museum.***

KW: Yeah, and now the educational part is what we want to expand. We could have people come in and have talks about various subjects, whether it be art or social issues.

THD: There's a world of possibilities. We just need more people involved. That's kind of one of our biggest problems.

KW: Volunteerism is really hard for any organization. Talk to any organization, and they'll tell you that finding volunteers is really hard.

EK: ***So the museum is completely volunteer-run, and I noticed on my visit that much of the merchandise is handmade and often seems to be "pay-what-you-can." Is this a part of MacDonald legacy/continuing relevance? Charles MacDonald never having substantially made money from art making, and being a prominent socialist.***

THD: Well, you know, "What would Charlie do?" We did have a couple of artist-run workshops that you had to pay for, but the money basically went to the artists, with us getting a small [cut], it was like a twenty-eighty split, twenty-percent to us and eighty-percent to the artists. Even within that, you know, we're helping the arts community or artists. And making our own merchandise, it really came out of having any money. It's like, you don't have any money, well, let's see what we can do ourselves.

But then, that's kind of how Charlie and Mabel worked. When they lived there, the house was really frigging cold because it's made of concrete. That's why Mabel made hooked rugs. They lived a modest life. They didn't have money, we didn't have any money either, so we're like, what can we make and sell? It just all kind of fit, I think.

THD: We've done some really great fundraisers, and I think a lot of community organizations, museums, whatever, try to do fundraisers that don't reflect their organization. I think you have to kind of stick with your core values and know who you are, being genuine, and that'll help you raise money or fundraise or whatever.
The Charles MacDonald Society does that very well. We don't make tons of money, but we do OK, cause we're true to ourselves. And then we always have a good time making stuff, too.

EK: ***In the same vein, during my visit, I saw that your collections room utilizes reused retail shelving. Which I think offers really intriguing possibilities for collection and archiving practices. Could you speak to that decision?***

KW: We don't have any money, so we're good at being creative.
The person that designed that [collection system] was an engineer [Andrew], and he saw there was a Target store closing in New Brunswick. So they had all that material. He bought the material, went to New Brunswick, and picked it up in a trailer. But before that, our artwork hung on bed frames.They have clean-up days around here twice a year. You can put all your junk outside of the road, and they come around and they pick it up. I went around for two of them, and whenever I saw a bed frame on the side of the road, I stopped, tied it on my car. When I had a bunch, I stood them up, and we hung art on either side of them. That worked, but Andrew came up with a better idea that was way more efficient.

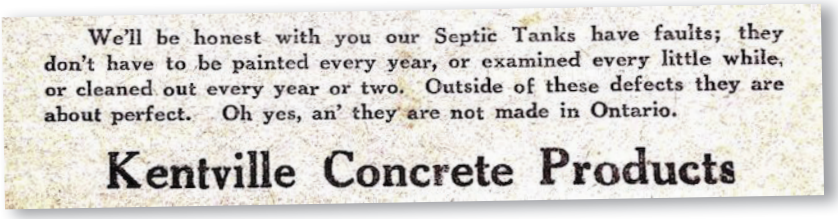
(Left) Handpainted sign at entrance to MacDonald Concrete House Museum, 2025.

(Right) Kentville Concrete Products newspaper advertisements, placed weekly by Charles MacDonald in the local weekly newspaper, "The Advertiser," between 1926 and 1946. (Courtesy of the Charles MacDonald House of Centreville Society).

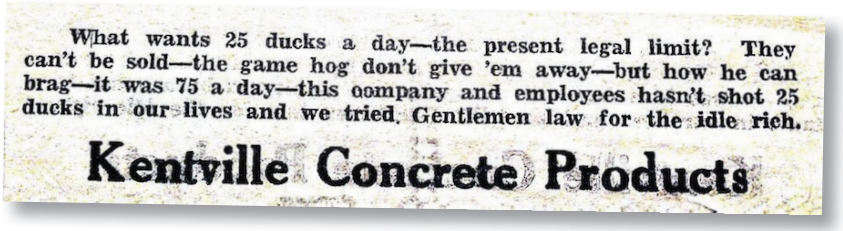
EK: ***Although it seems the museum has been embraced by the community now, what has the house's relationship with the community been like historically? I heard an anecdote that Mabel would cover the nude sculpture in the garden occasionally for the benefit of neighbors, and that a hunter near the cottages once shot at one of the deer sculptures, thinking it was real. I wondered if you could speak to those stories or share any other anecdotes about the house's reception?***

KW: Roscoe Fillmore,[13] Charlie brought him here because he was a socialist, communist organizer, and he did a lot of organized work, and lived a house over. He had kids, and he was a hardcore socialist, and his kids really felt that in the community, they were ostracized, and so were Charlie and Mabel. At, you know, some point, that really carried over. We've seen people say, "Oh yeah, they're socialists and you know, they're communists and socialists," even like today, there's still people who hold that. And other people just do not know about Charlie and Charlie's work and all the stuff that went on, and what they believed in.

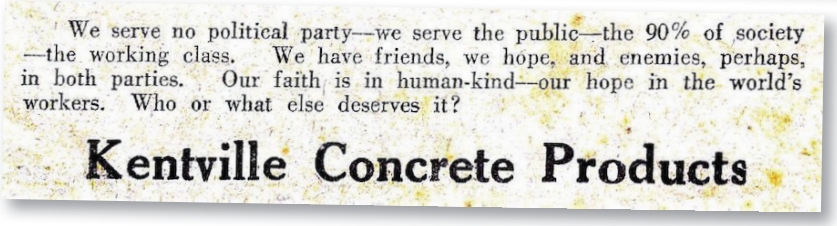
[Charlie] put an ad in the advertiser every week under the Kentville Concrete Company. Hardly ever did he talk about concrete. You know, he talked about socialist issues. Some of them are just really bizarre, and sometimes they were funny, and sometimes they were out there, but sometimes they were quite interesting.


We'll be honest with you our Septic Tanks have faults; they don't have to be painted every year, or examined every little while, or cleaned out every year or two. Outside of these defects they are about perfect. Oh yes, an' they are not made in Ontario.

Kentville Concrete Products


What wants 25 ducks a day—the present legal limit? They can't be sold—the game hog don't give 'em away—but how he can brag—it was 75 a day—this company and employees hasn't shot 25 ducks in our lives and we tried. Gentlemen law for the idle rich.

Kentville Concrete Products


We serve no political party—we serve the public—the 90% of society —the working class. We have friends, we hope, and enemies, perhaps, in both parties. Our faith is in human-kind—our hope in the world's workers. Who or what else deserves it?

Kentville Concrete Products

13 Roscoe Fillmore was a horticulturist and active in Communist politics in the Maritimes, the trade union movement, and radical journalism. In 1924, Roscoe Fillmore, his wife Margaret, and their four children, Dick, Ruth, Rosa, and Alexandra, arrived in Centreville from New Brunswick. Charles MacDonald and Roscoe Filmore formed the 'Centreville Socialists.'
Nicholas Fillmore, *Maritime Radical: The Life & Times of Roscoe Fillmore,* 1992.

MacDonald Gallery with assorted MacDonald concrete sculptures and hooked rugs. MacDonald Concrete House Museum, 2025.

THD: But some people didn’t, don’t, like the building. And when we were working on trying to restore it, there was a narrative of “Why are they doing that? Why don’t they just let that go? It’s just a waste of time.” No matter what you’re doing, there’s going to be naysayers. And you know what? We just ignored it. Because they’re wrong. It’s worth saving. And I think the building had kind of deteriorated before we started the restoration; it was real stinky inside. We had a problem with mold and mildew, and we had raccoons living in the attic. I think the local community was less interested in going there, and it kind of had been forgotten a bit.

But in the process of fixing it up, there’s scaffolding, and there’s work people there. All of a sudden, the local community is like, “Oh, what are they doing?” There’s a little bit more interest, and we had some [interest] when we were at different phases. When we were finishing the restoration, we had gatherings just for the local community. I think that really went a long way to welcoming them back in and them appreciating the space and kind of building community a little bit. And a lot of those people who live around there, they pop in all the time. In the summer, their kids, they come like every week. It’s something to do.

KW: There's the farmer's market next door; the people that own the farmer's market are very supportive of the Charles MacDonald Foundation. So they always donate stuff to us, and they come over. So you have businesses that are really supportive of this. In a small community, that helps. The farmer's market is a thriving business in town. A lot of people go there, and they see that they are supportive of the Charles MacDonald Foundation, and seem to think "OK, yeah, they must be [worthwhile]."

EK: ***Where do you see the MacDonald House going in the future?***

THD: We just got done with a three-year plan. One of the things was we need to get more people in the community interested and on the board of directors. I don't even live there anymore. So other than Kevin and I, we need somebody who's maybe ten or twenty years younger than us to kind of start taking an active interest so that we can pass this along. So that's something we really need to work on for the future.

One of our goals is to expand its usage beyond just June, July, and August. I just wrote a grant to get an intern. If we could have a paid intern, we could be open from May 1st to the end of September. I think our summer programming is really great, we just need to add onto the end. Instead of three months, it needs to be five months, and then hopefully it's a little bit more.

KW: Traditionally, before renovations, when the house was shut down for the season, we drained the water system, we just shut the house down. Well, now we don't do that. We have a better heating source; we have heat pumps. So the building can be used all year round, and we would like it to be. Have people either come in and, you know, have a meeting here, or a yoga class. Workshop, book club, whatever. People could just take ownership.

EK: ***Where do you see the MacDonald House going in the future?***

THD: I hope people go away [thinking] that Charlie was a really unique person, and this is a unique building. Like, this is just a real treasure found in this little, tiny town. [Leave] with an interest in the history, and an interest in the work, the building, the animals, all the stuff. It's a little hidden treasure, maybe not so hidden. That's what I like about it.

KW: A lot of people come in and are exposed to Charlie and Mabel and the work, and the house, and the uniqueness of the house, and the uniqueness of the grounds. And they say, "Wow, this is really cool," and go away and tell their friends, "We went there, and that you need to go too."

Terry Havlis Drahos is a visual artist, educator, and arts organizer. They have served on the Board of Directors of Visual Arts Nova Scotia (VANS) and as the chairperson of the Alliance of Kings Artists (AKA). Terry was also the founder of Uncommon Common Art (2008–2019), a public art and education initiative that brought public installations to the Nova Scotia countryside. Terry is the current board chairman of the Concrete House of Centreville Society.

Kevin West, likewise, is a Nova Scotia–based artist, as well as a local historian, arts organizer, and avid community contributor. Kevin was the longtime board chairman and continues to serve as a board member of the Concrete House of Centreville Society. He also serves as a lead Facilitator at Memory Café NS, a provincial nonprofit initiative to support quality of life and inclusion for people living with dementia and their care partners.

Together, Kevin and Terry led a restoration effort, recently completed, to revitalize and ensure a future for the Charles MacDonald Concrete House Museum of Centreville, Nova Scotia.

Charles and Mabel MacDonald in front of their concrete cottage in Huntington Point, Nova Scotia, circa 1951. (Courtesy of the Charles MacDonald House of Centreville Society).

Kevin West, *Whirly Jig*, 2017. Folk art automata installed on grounds of MacDonald Concrete House Museum, 2025.

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75	Glenholme (Jct. 2 & 4)	13	91
79	Great Village	4	87
89	Bass River	10	77
105	Five Islands	16	61
118	Parrsboro	13	48
134	Southampton (Jct. 2 & 2A)	16	32
147	Springhill (Jct. 2 & 4)	13	19
151	Springhill Junction	4	15
163	Amherst (Jct. 2, 4 & 6)	12	3
166	**N.B. Border**	3	0

4 NEW

Miles from New Brunswick	
0	**New Br**
3	Amherst (
15	Springhill
19	Springhill
32	Oxford (
55	Wentwor
61	Folly Lak
72	Glenholm
85	Truro (Jct
86	Junction 4
99	Kemptow
119	Alma (Jct.
126	New Gla

PRINCIPAL SHIP CONNECTIONS WITH NOVA SCOTIA

MAINE - NOVA SCOTIA

Bar Harbour, Me. - Yarmouth, N.S. Daily service by M. V. "Bluenose" from late June to mid-September; three times weekly from mid-September to late June. RESERVATIONS NECESSARY. Communicate with Canadian National Railways, Bar Harbour, Me., or Yarmouth, N.S.

NEW BRUNSWICK - NOVA SCOTIA

Saint John, N.B. - Digby, N.S. Weekday service year-round by S.S. "Princess Helene"; Sundays from late June to early September. RESERVATIONS NECESSARY. Communicate with Canadian Pacific Railway Service, Saint John, N.B., or Digby, N.S.

NOVA SCOTIA - PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

Caribou, N.S. - Wood Islands, P.E.I. Daily service, May through November.

NOVA SCOTIA - NEWFOUNDLAND

North Sydney, N.S. - Port aux Basques, Nfld. Daily service year-round by M.V. "William Carson." RESERVATIONS NECESSARY. Communicate with Canadian National Railways (Newfoundland Service) at North Sydney, N.S., or St. John's, Nfld.

NOVA SCOTIA - P.E.I. - MAGDALEN ISLANDS

Charlottetown, P.E.I. - Magdalen Islands, P.Q. - Pictou, N.S. Service twice weekly year-round. RESERVATIONS NECESSARY. Communicate with Magdalen Islands Transportation Company Ltd., Pictou, N.S.

BRUNSWICK BORDER TO GLACE BAY

	Intermediate Mileages	Miles from Glace Bay
unswick Border	0	301
Jct. 2, 4 & 6)	3	298
Junction	12	286
(Jct. 4 & 2)	4	282
lct. 4 & 21)	13	269
th	23	246
	6	241
e (Jct. 4 & 2)	11	230
4 & 2)	13	216
& 11	1	215
	13	202
4 & 6)	20	182
gow	7	175

33	Pugwash	4	74
43	Wallace	10	64
56	Tatamagouche	13	51
57	Junction 6 & 11	1	50
69	River John	12	38
79	Toney River	10	28
90	Pictou (Outskirts)	11	17
100	Alma (Jct. 6 & 4)	10	7
107	**New Glasgow** (via Trunk 4)	7	0

7 BEDFORD TO ANTIGONISH VIA DARTMOUTH AND EASTERN SHORE

Miles from Bedford		Intermediate Mileages	Miles from Antigonish
0	**Bedford** (Jct. 1, 2 & 7)	0	168
7	Dartmouth	7	161

17	New Germany	17	38
27	Springfield	10	28
38	Albany Cross	11	17
52	Nictaux Falls	14	3
55	**Middleton** (Jct. 10 & 11)	3	0

11 TRURO TO TATAMAGOUCHE

Miles from Truro		Intermediate Mileages	Miles from Tatamagouche
0	**Truro**	0	36
1	Junction 11 & 4	1	35
20	Earltown	19	16
35	Junction 11 & 6	15	1
36	**Tatamagouche**	1	0

Miles from Digby	
0	D
9	R
15	C
20	S
22	A
24	L
30	E
30	T
35	C
41	P

Responsible Drivers Consider Other

DISTANCES FROM VARIOUS POINTS TO NOVA SCOTIA BORDER

	Miles
ALBANY, N.Y.	798
AUGUSTA, Maine	430
BALTIMORE, Md.	1012
BAR HARBOUR, Me.	364
BOSTON, Mass.	622
BUFFALO, N.Y.	1083
CALAIS, Me.	219
CHICAGO, Ill. (Via Toronto and Quebec)	1580
CHICAGO, Ill. (Via Albany TO Bar Harbour)	1264
CLEVELAND, O. (Via Albany and Rutland, Vt.)	1286
CORNWALL, Ont.	766
DETROIT, Mich. (Via Quebec)	1367
FREDERICTON, N.B.	157
HARTFORD, Conn.	741
MONTREAL, P.Q. (Via Quebec)	710
MONTREAL, P.Q. (Via Newry TO Bar Harbour)	352
NEW YORK, N.Y. (TO Bar Harbour)	506

	Miles
NIAGARA FALLS, Ont. (Via Toronto)	1133
OTTAWA, Ont. (Via Montreal and Quebec)	836
OTTAWA, Ont. (Via Montreal TO Bar Harbour)	477
PHILADELPHIA, Pa.	944
PITTSBURGH, Pa.	1313
PORTLAND, Maine	515
PORTSMOUTH, N.H.	527
PROVIDENCE, R.I.	667
QUEBEC, P.Q.	531
SAINT JOHN, N.B.	132
SAULT STE. MARIE, Ont.	1330
ST. JOHNSBURY, Vt.	582
TORONTO, Ont. (Via Quebec)	1060
TORONTO, Ont. (Via Montreal TO Bar Harbour)	706
WASHINGTON, D.C.	1047
WINDSOR, Ont.	1281

Hooked Rug Museum of North America

Queensland, Nova Scotia, Canada

Major art galleries, although broad in their mandates, are often quite specific in what they are interested in collecting and exhibiting, excluding material cultures that are of great regional, personal, and cultural significance. Hooked rugs are one such material culture, a heritage craft displayed in homes all across North America. To those invested in hooked rugs, they are ubiquitous, yet perhaps due to their domestic associations, they are left out of major galleries. But there is no shortage of passion; people make hooked rugs just about as much as ever, and there is historical interest in the medium, yet there is a vacancy in representation.

The Hooked Rug Museum of North America was not founded by an institution or with a breadth of financial backing. They are not in a major city, nor did the founders have museological experience. The museum was founded on a passion for the medium, the knowledge that the space would be serving the community, and the urge to fill an archival vacancy. Thus, a unique “micro-museum,” representing a unique history, with North American, if not global, appeal was born. A site of pilgrimage for rug hookers everywhere, in rural Queensland, Nova Scotia.

The museum, founded by Suzanne Conrod, features a permanent display of rugs curated by province, designer, style, and age. As well as featuring rotating exhibits, highlighting and exhibiting an individual Canadian rug hooker, and an individual or unique community of American or international rug hookers, each year. The museum also endeavors to continue the craft and support existing rug hookers through a fibre shop featuring rugs on consignment and rug hooking supplies, along with regular workshops, classes, and community events.


Circa - 1900
Hooked by - Unknown
Donated by - Founding Director
Suzanne Conrod
Rembrandt , Turner,
No- Eva Misener maybe
MYRTLE
LEGACY
MOORE'S
BDF

Sherry speaks to the rich history of rug hooking in Nova Scotia and throughout North America. Along with the medium's historical and contemporary relevance, the question of how a museum such as the Hooked Rug Museum of North America comes to be, the joys and difficulties of juggling several duties in managing a small museum, and the broad audience the museum serves. Our conversation took place over a phone call on Feb. 3rd, 2026.

Eli King (EK): ***You noted in arranging a time for our interview that you might like to speak a bit on how the Hooked Rug Museum of North America came about before we get started with the otherwise prepared questions?***

Sherry Chandler (SC): The Hooked Rug Museum itself was a dream of Suzanne Conrod, of Chester, Nova Scotia. Together with her husband, Hugh, they began collecting the rugs and artifacts that would form the basis for the museum collection. They had started collecting long before the museum was a registered entity, that happened in 2006. It was their dream to preserve the history of rugs. They went to Florida, down near Clearwater, every year in the winter, and there's a lot of rug hooking groups down there. Suzanne joined one, and they all got talking about how there was nothing, no museum, set aside for hooked rugs. So, with her American friends and her husband, they came up with the idea that they needed to establish a full-fledged museum, and they needed to establish it for North America.

The only thing was that it was hard to raise money for a dream; people were very skeptical and didn't really want to donate a lot of money. I ran into Suzanne, I think it was probably 2008 or 2009, at a rug hooking group, and we got talking. [We concluded that] for people to donate hundreds of dollars toward the dream, we needed to have a building. Because they lived in Nova Scotia, they wanted it in Nova Scotia. So they looked around everywhere, in the valley, different parts of Nova Scotia, for a building. All of a sudden, this building came up for sale in Queensland. Queensland is about a 15-minute drive between Chester, where we live, and Halifax. It used to be a bowling alley. So it was a large flat one-story building, and a bowling alley is quite large. We all went down to look at it in 2009. And that was it. We said, "This is a perfect spot."

By this time, it wasn't just their project, their dream. There was the society, the Hooked Rug Museum Society. That was registered at our joint stock companies, and we had a board of directors, and we had directors at large, which were people in the States, and they were helping to support it. So once we had the building, then a lot of fundraising came, and there was a lot of work to be done. In 2011, we opened, we had the [Fibre Arts] marketplace. We only had 450 rugs and items for sale in the marketplace. Now we have over 10,000 items up for sale in the marketplace, so we have grown quite a bit.

In 2011, we had the fibre marketplace and one exhibit, an exhibit called Noah's Ark.[1] Suzanne and her husband couldn't get a loan because we were a non-for-profit society, so her husband [Hugh] put up a lot of money to get things going. In 2012, there were five galleries that opened, and they were still working on the interior. When the interior was finished in 2013, we had our grand opening. Hugh got very ill, and he passed away. We had our grand opening in June of 2013. He passed away in September 2013. So he did get to see the dream. And Suzanne is still part of the museum; she is the vice chair. And I am the treasurer, and we both teach here and manage the museum.

EK: ***Can you go a bit into your background, what led to your interest in hooked rugs, and inspired you to volunteer your time to the organization?***

SC: My grandmother used to hook rugs, and I used to come down to visit my grandmother. And I just used to look at all the hooked rugs that she had in the bedrooms. She was probably in her 70s at the time, and she no longer hooked rugs. She had to do it as a child because her mother made her do them for the house; they had a big family. After a while, she got tired of doing them, but she did have two or three in each bedroom.

I always wanted to learn, so I began to take some lessons after I retired in 2005. I didn't do it beforehand because I was commuting from Chester to Halifax about an hour and a half each way, so we had very little time to have much of a hobby. And it takes a lot of time to hook a rug when you're a beginner. So Suzanne had a rug hooking group established here in Chester, and we used to go once a week and sit around. It was more of a social thing for women. She sponsored me because she wanted me to become a rug hooking teacher, so that I could teach at the Museum. There's a group in the States, the Pearl McGown Rug School, to train people to become certified rug hooking teachers and to spread the word and to encourage people to learn to rug hook. It was a four-year course, and every summer Suzanne and I would go down to Massachusetts in July, and we would be there for a week. We went every year. I started out in 2009.

Then Suzanne invited me to a museum board meeting back in 2010. I worked at the Royal Bank, so they thought I would be good for figures and doing things with my Royal Bank experience. I became the assistant treasurer, and then, later that year, the treasurer passed away. So I became the treasurer in 2010, and I'm still the treasurer right now. I can't get rid of the job; it's a hard job. But I enjoy it, I really do. The whole idea of a hooked rug museum intrigued me at the time, and I wanted to be part of it.

1 *Noah's Ark* (2006-2009) is a large-scale hooked rug sculpture by Mary Sheppard-Burton, it includes hooked figurative representations of the ark, as well as animals and people, from the biblical narrative. The piece is featured in the museum in a gallery dedicated to it.

Mary Sheppard-Burton, *Noah's Ark*, 2009. Views from around the dedicated Noah's Ark Gallery. The Hooked Rug Museum of North America, 2025.

Every day, year-round, I'm doing something for the museum. Either as a treasurer doing reports, or managing things. I get all the teachers, I do the workshops, and I organize all the events. I co-manage the museum. I apply for the summer students. I promote the museum. I attend rug schools down in the States, down in Maine, about three times a year. The museum is having silent auctions or raising money at these events. Last year, we got over $4,000 in donations just from the events that I go to down there. So it's well worth going and networking and promoting, and it is fun. You name it, I do it, and I used to do the inventory, but I had to pass that on because it just grew to be too much.

EK: ***Do you find that the people getting involved in rug hooking, with the museum or otherwise, are of similar backgrounds as yourself? Women of a certain age.***

SC: No, there's hardly any people that are involved with the museum. Suzanne and I are the only two certified teachers. The rest are people that have just learned to rug hook, or they're rug hookers. It's not their occupation, it's just their hobby. That's the people that volunteer. And the people that come to the different events and the classes and stuff don't have the background that Suzanne and I have.

EK: ***There's an emphasis on education and just getting people interested in rug hooking?***

SC: Absolutely. Last year, we had 18 classes and workshops. We have a variety; there's different styles of hooking now. I try to get a variety of teachers that come. Then her [Suzanne] and I teach the beginners class, and we've had to have two classes because there were so many people wanting to learn. It's crazy, but it's really something that's caught on. Last year was our best year ever.

I think COVID sort of slowed things down, and people were afraid to come out in groups, and that seems to have passed, and people are all coming back. Now we have ten to twelve people in each class, and that's enough for one teacher. If we go over that, then we'll have to have another class.

Fibre Art Market. Hooked Rug Museum of North America, 2025.

A museum volunteer demonstrating rug hooking to Akira Jakkson in Fibre Art Market. Hooked Rug Museum of North America, 2025.

EK: ***I read in a 2021 SaltWire article that part of the museum's founding mandate was to honour the craft in such a way as to elevate rug hooking to a fine art. Rug hooking has perhaps been taken for granted historically, given that it is an art form primarily practiced by women, displayed domestically, used for utility, and often practiced as a 'hobby.' Could you speak to that effort to achieve broader recognition for rug hooking as an art form? What does this recognition mean for the art form and the rug hookers you exhibit?***

SC: Well, in the States at the turn of the century, there were very well-known designers. One of them was Pearl McGown, she started six schools in the States. A lot of people have gone through and taken classes there, and a lot of those people have opened their own shops, and they do their own exhibits. And these ladies are famous world round. We have people from Japan that come over every summer to attend the school in the States. There is a rug hooking magazine,[2] and different rug hooking organizations that are worldwide.

These designers are the people that have been recognized and known worldwide. Wilfred Grenfell was a medical missionary that went to Newfoundland and Labrador and traveled up and down the coast. They [Wilfred Grenfell] opened up a mission in St. Anthony, right at the tip of the Eastern side of Newfoundland. The nurses and the staff there did hooked rugs made from nylons that he imported from New York. They dyed them different colors, but they were limited in the colors. And if you happen to have one of the Grenfell rugs and it has the tag on it, they're worth a lot of money. So, ladies are teaching Grenfell over in Newfoundland. I have a friend that is teaching a Grenfell class at a retreat. It's still around, and we have at the museum forty-three of these Grenfell rugs. So, there are these big names in rug hooking. And these are people that just didn't do it as a hobby; they did it as a business.

In the States, there was also Edmund Sands Frost. He was a Maine peddler… from Biddeford, Maine. This is Circa 1870, he went around to the different houses, people wanted hooked rug patterns and hooking supplies. He designed hooked rugs. We actually have a catalog here on display at the museum with all his rugs. It would be like the Eaton's catalog; they would pick out what they want and order it, and he would bring it to them the next time. People will go to any length to buy, to get one of Edmund Frost's patterns, because they're almost non-existent.

We [Nova Scotia] had the Garrett Factory. In New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, who had their own design, the Garrett Bluenose patterns. Bluenose patterns are still very, very sought after. That was around the 1890s until 1970, and the last Garrett either retired or passed away. Suzanne and I went up to see the building, it was demolished around November 2014. But there is a group in Nova Scotia, the Rug Hooking Guild [of Nova Scotia], that went in and traced all the patterns.

2 "The Loop: Magazine of the Rug Hooking Guild of Nova Scotia."

You can still order the Garrett Bluenose patterns on their website. It still lives on in a way; all over the world, people are looking for the Bluenose patterns.

There was Mary Shepard Burton from Salisbury, Maryland. We knew her at the museum. Burton is the lady that hooked Noah's Ark and donated it to the museum, and she was a textile artist and a teacher. She was born in 1922, and she just passed away in 2010. These are the foundation of the rug hooking world, and they're really well-known and still studied worldwide.

EK: ***So, there is an emphasis on the designers over the individual rug hookers, at least historically?***

SC: There's a lot of individual hookers, but these [designers] are the people who started the rug hooking craze. They didn't fade away into the background. The Pearl McGown school is still running. There's five of them now in the States, and they're filled every year with people wanting to learn and becoming rug hooking teachers, and then they're going out, and they're teaching because they're McGown-certified teachers now. When you say you're a McGown-certified teacher, that kind of puts you up a bit because they know that the training is very extensive. All the people want to learn from the schools, and from the people that are descended from them [designers].

In the museum, we have a gallery for the designers. We have the grand panel rugs, and we have Edmund Frost rugs, and we have Pearl McGown rugs. They're not just rug hookers that used to rug hook, and now they're gone. It continues, it's still alive. People are still following and wanting their patterns and their designs. Hooking is so big that I could go every day in my area here and go to a different hooking group, women that are sitting and hooking. They're just doing it as a hobby and their own personal use.

EK: ***Do you see a separation between hooking's past as a major utilitarian art form and how it is treated now as more of a 'hobby.'***

SC: Yes, a lot of these people that maybe didn't take any of these classes, but what they've done is they've learned to hook, and they have their own rug hooking studios, and they teach in their studios. We have a few local ones around that sell supplies and different things. But some of them have their own designs, and they dye their own wool, and they sell it in their shops.


JOHN E. GARRETT
FOUNDER- GARRETT RUG PATTERN FACTORY
WHY NOT COPYRIGHT ?
RESCUE EFFORT SAVES GARRETT FACTORY ART AND ARTIFACTS FROM LOSS
THE GARRETT BLUENOSE PATTERNS

(Above and to Left), Garret Gallery and Factory, featuring equipment and pen and ink rug art salvaged from the Garret Pattern Factory in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia. Hooked Rug Museum of North America, 2025.

EK: ***It's great to hear that so many people are taking it on as a medium, continuing the craft.***

SC: It's really, really big in New England. It was when the Acadians were expelled from Nova Scotia that rug hooking went to the New England states and went down to New Orleans. It all originated from here. But those other people picked it up, and they were entrepreneurs, businesswomen, and they saw a way of designing and making some money. So they went for it.

The old [large area] rugs, the ones that the teachers used to teach at the turn of the century, are very, very fine. You see those with all the very fine details and the flowers. But nowadays, with rug hooking, you don't have very, very fine, delicate work. I would say ninety-percent of the people that are hooking now want to have something done fast, so they use a wider cut. I'm hooking a rug with eighth-of-an-inch strips, and it's taking me forever, but it's a lot finer work. There's not too many people who want to do that kind of work anymore. They all use a wider cut of wool, and it goes a lot faster. You can hook a rug in a week, and that's what they like: get it done and move on to another one. Because there's so many beautiful patterns out there, they want to do them all. And I do too, I have so many patterns upstairs it's unreal, I'll never get them done. The rug hookers can never die because they have to get all their patterns hooked.

EK: ***Is that kind of fine rug hooking you mentioned something that you look for in the fibre artists that the museum features annually?***

SC: We feature a Canadian artist and an American [or international] artist [annually]. A lot of them do use fine, fine work. And some of them don't. Some of them use a wider cut and bright, gaudy colours, they'll do geckos and funky fish, and they do beautiful stuff, and it's a lot of fun. It's not like the old standard fine work. But it's fun because we never know what we're going to get. With some of the fine rugs, people come in, and they just stand there and look and look. We had the rugs from Guatemala,[3] and they were beautiful. Down there, they have these bright colors, bright pink. They were completely different from anything that we'd had before. We had them for two years, and it drew a lot of people in to see these beautiful rugs. A lot of the rug hookers now are organizing groups, and they're all going down to Guatemala to learn from these ladies. There's been three or four trips down to learn how to hook like these ladies.

3 The 2024 International Rug Hooking Artists of the Year were Guatemala's "Multicolores" Group. Multicolores is an association of sixty-two Maya women artists. Based in nine communities in Guatemala, these women create original works of textile art using rug-hooking and embroidery. www.hookedrugmuseumnovascotia.org/criteria-for-rhay/2024-rhay/

The Compass Rose Rug, hooked with naturally dyed burlay on burlap, dontated by founder Suzanne Conrod. Exhibited in the Interpretive Centre. Hooked Rug Museum of North America, 2025.

EK: ***So there's a fair amount of geographical separation then between the most important spaces for rug hookers, and a fair amount of travel or pilgrimage between them?***

SC: Oh, yeah. There's one [shop] that is about a half hour from me, there's another one that's an hour and a half, and another one that's about two hours. And that's about it, really. Around here, there's not many because, to start up on the businesses, you have to invest so much. But there's not a whole lot, not as many as you would think. Even in the States, there's not that many. Because people will travel. It's a nice day, have to go to the rug shop, they make a day of it.

EK: ***The museum is curated geographically, having galleries curated by province, and it's called the Museum of North America. I just wondered about that broad geographical focus.***

SC: Suzanne and her husband used to go to Clearwater every year for the winter. And she met the other ladies there, hooking. They used to talk about, "What's going to happen to everybody's rugs, what's going to happen to all the old rugs? They're going to end up in a dump." So they thought that they should be preserved. Nobody down there wanted to take it on, so Suzanne did it. And that's why we get a lot of donations of old rugs and stuff from the States, because they decided to call it the Hooked Rug Museum of North America, which would cover all the antique rugs in the States and Canada, it's not just Nova Scotia. We have twenty-five directors at large in the States. They play a big part in contributing to the museum, whether by cash donations or donations of rugs or artifacts. And of course, it's the only [hooked] rug museum in North America.

EK: ***Is part of the rationale behind the museum being in Queensland, Nova Scotia, rug hooking's consistent presence in Nova Scotia, in addition to the practical element of the founder being from the area?***

SC: It could have been anywhere practically. But it's within driving distance of where Suzanne lives in Chester. They wanted it close, and it [the property] just happened to come up in Queensland. But it's great because there are a lot of hookers in the area. Suzanne and her husband called it a home away from home, and a [sign saying as much] is still on the door of the museum. She wanted all the rug hookers to be able to come to the museum, come in, sit down, and look and feel like they were at home. That was the type of atmosphere that she was trying to create, to give back to the rug hookers.

A display of small rugs donated by diverse and international visitors. Hooked Rug Museum of North America, 2025.

View of New Brunswick Gallery. Hooked Rug Museum of North America, 2025.

EK: ***The Rug Hooking Museum just filled a vacancy that people were really looking for?***

SC: In 2020, during COVID, we received sixty-five big packing boxes, not little boxes, humongous boxes. Sixty-five of them came from Massachusetts. A lady was going to a nursing home. And her daughter called the museum and donated all her hooking books, all her wool, and all their supplies to the museum. We love to have it; we always need supplies to sell in the store. When I would get the donations, I would decide whether it was something that we were going to keep for the museum or whether we were going to sell it. I only keep things for the museum to archive if it has a historic value. Some people think: "Well, my mother hooked this rug ten years ago." Well, that's a new rug; it doesn't have any historic value. Once they sign it over to us, I'll decide we're going to sell it. That's where we generate the money from the marketplace.

People come through the museum, and they go back home, and they realize, "Oh, wow, you know, we'll send a donation." There's different groups that send a donation every year. It's amazing.

EK: ***How was the museum's permanent collection developed?***

SC: We don't buy rugs. We never had the money to buy them. They've been curated, been archived. They all have numbers, and they're all in a register, and everything is recorded. The ones that you see in all the galleries belong to the museum; they're not for sale. The big room where we have our classroom, what we call the auditorium, those on the walls are rugs from the artist of the year. The Canadian is on one side, the American [or international] is on the other. The rest of the walls are all local rugs. Hooking groups have brought in their own rugs to hang up to display to the public. They're only there for a year. Each year, all the rugs in the auditorium are changed, and a bunch come in.

The other rugs that are in the New Brunswick Gallery, the Nova Scotia, the international, the Quebec, Ontario, and the Founder's Gallery, they're all owned by the museum and we change a few of the racks [every year]. But they're pretty much there all the time. We have a storage room. We've got over a thousand rugs that the museum owns

EK: ***Were they primarily donated by the founder?***

SC: No, like the New Brunswick Gallery, for example, one of the directors lives in New Brunswick,[4] and every year, she puts out a challenge to the rug hookers there. One year, she put on a challenge for thirty rugs that depicted the covered bridges of New Brunswick. And it's a good thing she did, because some of them [the bridges] got lost, damaged, and gone during one of the last big storms.

4 Erin McKenna. Director-at-Large, New Brunswick.

These hooked rugs are made by volunteers; when they're finished, they're donated to the museum, and I issue a tax receipt for the value of the rug. This year, she [the New Brunswick director] is doing lighthouses of New Brunswick. Those rugs will come in April, and they will be hung up this year. In the Founders Gallery, the rugs were donated by Suzanne, the founding director. Some of her rugs are in there, and she donated those to the museum.

The only rugs that are on display that we don't own are the artist of the year ones and the other groups that are on the walls in the auditorium. [Donations] come from all over because the museum is so well known, and they figure that they want their work preserved.

Display of rug hooking usung recycled burlap, in the Interpretive Centre. Hooked Rug Museum of North America, 2025.

EK: ***How do you think about the museum's place in relation to other nearby historical houses and art galleries?***

SC: It's funny, you've got tourist attractions right around you, and you only go to them when you have company, or you take somebody. So a lot of the local people, we don't get a lot, they don't even know what we are. The nearby Hubbards Heritage Society[5] decided that they were going to have all their artifacts brought to the museum this year. We have a special spot where we're going to have things like the deeds and the grants from England, all their artifacts are going to be on display, because they're not getting people to look at their stuff. They figured if it was at the [Hooked Rug] museum, it would bring a different crowd, and people would see the hundreds of heritage things, and they would come to the museum. Their Board of Trade meetings come to the museum once a year, and we sponsor that.

We are working with the community, it's good that way. In the summer have an arts and crafts festival, and that brings in a lot of the community. You have a vendor coming in, that's something local, and people are driving by, and they see the flags and the balloons, and they come in. We also rent out the museum; we have different groups that come in. Knitters, they have machines that they bring in, and they rent it for four days. We have the K9 and its dogs; they have to sniff out little containers. They let one dog in at a time. We have different groups that want to have their annual meetings at the museum, because of the big auditorium. We've had funeral services, celebrations of life. We've had two or three of those. People locally, not even hookers. It's good because people come in and they see the stuff, and then there's word of mouth again.

But as far as other museums, I would have no idea. We started by word of mouth, and we have twenty-five directors at large in the States. So the word is completely spread all through the States. The people that come to the museum are basically coming to see something unique. It's not a regular art gallery, it's not a heritage house. It's something really unique. It's caught on, I should say. People come from British Columbia who are rug hookers. Last year, we had so many people from British Columbia and out West, and they came to the Hooked Rug Museum because everybody's talking about it. Last year, we had people from Australia, we had people from Japan, we had them from all over the world, really. they tell us they're strictly coming to see the museum because they've heard so much about it and how wonderful it is. It's different, I think that's the key. It's different than an art gallery.

5 The Hubbards Heritage Society is based in Hubbards, Nova Scotia, an unincorporated rural community on the South Shore, neighboring Queensland, Nova Scotia.

EK: ***That seems especially impressive given that the museum itself is fairly rural.***

SC: Absolutely, and it blows our mind. “Oh my God,” you know, “You came all the way from there to here, and you found us?” It’s amazing, there were some people from California this year that came, strictly because they wanted to go somewhere different, and they wanted to see the museum because they had heard so much about it. A lot of them are rug hookers, and their husbands stay in the car, and they say, you know, “I only have ten minutes because he’s out there.” We tell them to drag them in. You would be surprised when they come out; it’s the men that are bragging. They’re saying, “Oh wow, I’m so glad I came in. Boy, I never saw anything like that.” And they’re more enthused and excited about it than the women. Or they come in, and we sit them down and give them a coffee or whatever, you know, so that their wife has time to look around.

EK: ***So the museum allows for a broader audience; it’s quite accessible.***

SC: The best thing that happened to us was the twinning of the highway from Halifax out. Last summer, they finished it. So what used to be almost an hour to go is now like a half hour if you take the divided highway, rather than the scenic route along the water. That has helped a lot. But it doesn’t seem to be a problem. We figured at first that nobody was going to come here. Because it’s in the middle of nowhere, really. It’s kind of rewarding when people come out of the museum, and you ask them, you know, “What was your favorite, what did you like the best, or how did you like it?” And everything is so positive.

EK: ***Rug hooking, as a utilitarian medium, generally seems quite accessible.***

SC: In the fibre market, we train all our staff to hook, for when people come in for help. The staff and the volunteers all have their own hooking experience, and they can discuss the different styles of rugs with people, and they can help them with any issues or problems they have with their rugs. We’re very lucky that our volunteers are already established crafters. The girls are experienced enough that they can let them sit down and try the different types of hooks. You just can’t sell anybody any kind of a hook and tell them this is what you need. They need to try it. For anybody who comes in and wants to learn how to hook, they have a little sample, and they show people how to hook, and then they sit people down, and they try to hook it, and they learn. The next thing you know, they’re buying a kit.

But around the turn of the century, when it was colder, and you didn't have insulated homes, and they just had a little wood stove, they only used their parlor on Sunday, and they had their beautiful rugs in there. Then, after a while, they moved to the kitchen, but they had to have rugs on the floor. And then they moved them out to the back room or the back porch. And then finally they get moved out to the dog house, or for the animals. They were just made with whatever they had, like an old uniform. Then it became more of a finer art. But people still use whatever they have. Old suit jackets, old skirts, or old pants.

EK: ***I remember seeing a rug hooked from men's neckties.***

SC: That's in the interpretive center; that room displays all the older rugs. Sometimes people used burlap bags, and they would hook the burlap potato bags up. They would run out of clothing to use, and they would unravel those burlap bags, and they would dye the little strips. They were called burlap on burlap because they didn't have any cloth. Back then, they knew what vegetables gave off different colors. They weren't very pretty, they were a lot of browns and beiges, bits with beautiful red dyes. But that's what they did to survive and to keep warm. The other one that we have in the [interpretive center] was a casket rug. It was on a rocking chair, and they used to flip them around and lay them over the top of the casket. But now it's more of a fun thing.

Now, some of the finer rugs that people are doing, like what I'm doing, they call it a fine art; "painting with wool." We had a display one year, and the lady lived in the States, near a national park, and she would go out and take pictures and come back [and hook]. Well, you'd almost think it was a painting or a picture. You wouldn't think that anybody could hook something pictorial with the mountains and the trees and everything with just wool. But she was able to create it. Painting with wool is like a real fine art form. A lot of people are doing that. I do the fine ones, I won't sell them or anything. I have them on my walls instead of pictures. I don't want to roll them and put them in a closet.

EK: ***Would you ever exhibit your rugs at the museum?***

SC: I suppose if I had fifteen beautiful rugs that I wanted to take off my walls. From May to October, I could, but I don't want to take them all down. I don't have that many. A lot of these women have a whole lot of rugs. They keep hooking and hooking. And I suppose if I was working for thirty or forty years, I might have a lot of rugs, too. Mine are just for personal use. I do have some friends who hook very fast, and they'll hook a rack, and they'll bring it to the museum, and they'll put it in the fibre marketplace on consignment. This one girl, that's all she does. She hooks all year. She hooks and hooks and hooks and then brings them in in April and puts them on consignment. Maybe they're on a fixed income, maybe they want to make some extra money; there are a lot of people who are doing that.

View of Interpretive Centre. Hooked Rug Museum of North America, 2025.

Display of hooked rug dye catalogs and other supplies in the Interpretive Centre. Hooked Rug Museum of North America, 2025.

The majority of people are doing it for their own satisfaction. It's a gratification they get that they've created something themselves, and everybody is telling them how good it is and how nice it looks. I think it's mostly that for me. It's something that is very relaxing. If I'm having a bad day with something else, I get my hooking out, and it relaxes you. You just go into another world, you know, you just block out everything.

EK: ***The museum seems quite individual in that it serves as an art museum, a teaching museum, a heritage site, and a community centre. How does the museum manage to operate in this manner?***

SC: We grew so fast, and I did every job. We have three paid staff. We have an assistant manager, and she looks after the marketplace and the museum, and we have two people in the office. There's my assistant, and there's another new administrative job just created last year. Then in the summer, I apply for some students through the federal government, and I've been lucky to get two. They're only there for July and August, but that help gives our volunteers a break. We have about ten volunteers, and each of the volunteers has a special job. One of them works with kids, one of them does all the catering, and they bring different things to the museum.

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EK: ***What impressions do you hope the visitors to the museum come away with?***

SC: I hope their experience will encourage them to take hooking classes or learn to do some rug hooking and to pass along their experience to others. I would like to think that it would be an unforgettable experience, something new, something that they won't see down the road or somewhere else. I hope that they feel overwhelmed. Some of them do feel when they come over that it was overwhelming. They say we have to come back. "We were only here an hour, we need two or three hours, and it's too overwhelming." And a lot of them, especially the men, say that it's a complete surprise. They weren't expecting to see that at all. They take brochures with them and whatever handouts, they say they will take them back to their groups and pass them out at the meetings. But I do hope that their experience will encourage them to improve on their own hooking and pass along their experience to others.

View of entrance to the Hooked Rug Museum of North America, 2025.

Sherry Chandler is a retiree, certified Pearl McGown School rug hooking instructor, and life-long resident of Nova Scotia. Since its founding, Sherry has worked with the Hooked Rug Museum of North America in Queensland, Nova Scotia. She currently serves as the treasurer and a director. Along with the museum's founding director, Suzanne Conrod, Sherry manages much of the museum's operations and leads regular rug hooking workshops and classes, as well as attending many rug hooking events across the Maritimes and the American East Coast.

Ottawa
Montreal
Hull
Pembroke
Renfrew
Arnprior
Smiths Falls
Perth
Brockville
Kingston
Gananoque
Belleville
Trenton
Peterborough
Cobourg
Cornwall
Hawkesbury
Lachine
Longueuil
St. Jean
St. Jerome
Joliette
Sorel
Ogdensburg
Massena
Malone
Plattsburg
Burlington
Montpelier
Watertown
Lake Ontario
Oswego
Rochester
Syracuse
Utica
Rome
Albany
Schenectady
Troy
Saratoga Sprs.
Glens Falls
Lake George
Ticonderoga
Rutland
Bennington
Pittsfield
Binghamton
Elmira
Ithaca
Auburn
Geneva
Oneonta
Norwich
Cortland
Kingston
Poughkeepsie
Newburgh
Port Jervis
Scranton
Honesdale
Williamsport
Danbury
Waterbury
ADIRONDACK STATE PARK
ADIRONDACK MOUNTAINS
Tupper Lake
Saranac Lake
Lake Placid
CATSKILL STATE PARK
CATSKILL MTS.
Hudson
Catskill
Lake Champlain
St. Lawrence River
Ottawa Riv.
GATINEAU PARK
LETCHWORTH ST. PK.
WATKINS GLEN ST. PK.
FREE FERRY
VERMONT
NEW YORK


M A I N E
N E W H A M P S H I R E
M A S S A C H U S E T T S
C O N N E C T I C U T
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Gulf
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UNITED STATES
CANADA
BAXTER ST. PK. (MT. KATAHDIN)
ACADIA NAT'L PARK
MT. WASHINGTON EL. 6288
FRANCONIA NOTCH STATE RES.
WHITE MTNS.
HAMPTON BEACH ST. PK.
PRIVATE ROAD OPEN TO PUBLIC
STEAMER
TOLL BR.
TOLL RD.
Thetford Mines
Victoriaville
Arthabaska
Drummondville
Danville
Richmond
Sherbrooke
Magog
Coaticook
Lennoxville
Megantic
Lake Megantic
Woburn
Jackman
Greenville
Moosehead Lake
Seboomook
Pittston Farm
Rockwood
The Forks
Monson
Guilford
Bingham
Dover-Foxcroft
Brownville Junction
Millinocket
Medway
Mattawamkeag
Lincoln
Houlton
Patten
Sherman
Island Falls
Danforth
Topsfield
Calais
St. Stephen
Woodstock
Old Town
Bangor
Brewer
Bucksport
Ellsworth
Bar Harbor
Machias
Cherryfield
Columbia Falls
Belfast
Camden
Rockland
Vinalhaven Island
Isle Au Haut
Swans Island
Long Island
Waldoboro
Wiscasset
Bath
Brunswick
Gardiner
Augusta
Waterville
Skowhegan
Norridgewock
Farmington
Wilton
Rumford
Bethel
Lewiston
Auburn
Gray
Portland
Westbrook
Saco
Biddeford
Wells
York Corner
Portsmouth
Dover
Rochester
Sanford
Conway
Fryeburg
Berlin
Gorham
Colebrook
Errol
Upton
Rangeley
Stratton
Eustis
Lancaster
Littleton
Twin Mountain
Glen
Plymouth
Meredith
Laconia
Lake Winnipesaukee
Franklin
Concord
Manchester
Exeter
Nashua
Keene
Claremont
Lebanon
Hanover
Newport
Brattleboro
St. Johnsbury
Lyndonville
Newburyport
Amesbury
Haverhill
Lawrence
Lowell
Ipswich
Gloucester
Beverly
Salem
Lynn
Cambridge
Boston
Quincy
Dedham
Brockton
Plymouth
Taunton
Fall River
New Bedford
Providence
Pawtucket
Woonsocket
Newport
Westerly
Stonington
New London
Norwich
Hartford
Middletown
Springfield
Holyoke
Worcester
Fitchburg
Leominster
Marlboro
Athol
Northfield
Greenfield
Amherst
Provincetown
Wellfleet
Orleans
Chatham Port
Cape Cod Bay
Yarmouth
Barnstable
Hyannis
Falmouth
Monomoy Island
Nantucket Sound
Elizabeth Islands
Marthas Vineyard
Nantucket


Museum of Everyday Life
embarking on our mission of glorious obscurity
Museum of Everyday Life
PERMANENT COLLECTION
IN HERE
MILKING PARLOUR GALLERY
special exhibit

Museum of Everyday Life

Glover, Vermont, United States

Objects and art pieces, acquisitions and artifacts, ancient and contemporary, are often rendered static in major museum and gallery collections. Decontextualized from the passage of time and everyday utility, objects are put behind glass and on pedestals with limited context. The journey these objects take to get to these displays, both in their inital production and utilitarian use, and the particulars of the object's collection or donation, is obfuscated or mythologized in exhibition. In so doing, the process of curation is elevated to a ritual of behind-the-scenes elitism, until the curation no longer communicates what it set out to communicate or reaches who it may have set out to reach, thoroughly removed from the everyday labour the creative act entailed.

This is not so at the Museum of Everyday Life, a contemporary model for the roadside attraction, elevated to an artist-curator medium. Founded and continuing to be expanded by Clare Dolan, a nurse and puppeteer in the small town of Glover, Vermont, the Museum of Everyday Life is a small, rural, roadside gallery, museum, and attraction of proudly declared "glorious obscurity."

Clare's enthusiasm for ordinary, everyday objects led to the creation of the Museum of Everyday Life, where she serves as the primary curator and the so-called "chief operating philosopher." The museum, experimental in nature, has a gallery for temporary exhibits on ordinary yet under-examined subjects, as well as a gallery for semi-permanent exhibits. Exhibits range from everyday utilitarian objects such as pencils, safety pins, and toothbrushes, to everyday occurrences like dust, stains, and the making of lists.

The museum is run as a collaborative space and through a self-service model, hand-painted signs both practically and proudly make it known that the visitor must turn the lights on when they arrive and turn them off when they leave. Each of the museum's exhibitions is built through community donations of ideas and objects, and exhibition staging is a community effort. Workshops are regularly run on grassroots exhibition creation and micro-museum building. All in an effort to emphasize the relationship between objects and people.

Clare speaks to the overlooked objects and labours of everyday life, the lived experience of time, the limitations of the institutional museum, and the importance of participatory community building to the art space. Our conversation took place over a phone call on January 18th, 2026.

Eli King (EK): ***Your bio on the museum's website states you created the museum out of an "enthusiasm for everyday life." What is the nature of that enduring enthusiasm?***

Clare Dolan (CD): I think I'm interested in the small things that make up the experience of living. I think that's just part of my personality. I'm someone who has always been kind of confounded by time and confused about, interested in, how the duration and the experience of time passing is so malleable, how it changes so much depending on where you are and what you're doing and what you're thinking, what your interior state is, what the exterior environment is.

I'm someone who's always surprised by how long things take. I never know how long it will take me to do a certain given task. I guess being really interested in time and the experience of time has made me really hyper aware of how much time we spend doing all of the little in-between interstitial activities that we do around the bigger events.

We spend so much more time brushing our teeth, washing the dishes, doing our laundry, tying our shoes, and buttoning buttons. We spend more time doing those things than we do having an important conversation or studying, or the big 'getting married,' The big events of life. So it's made me really interested in and aware of what those little interstitial moments are made of, and what is the fabric of everyday life? What comprises that? And why don't we pay more attention to it?

EK: ***Is your primary occupation still nursing? I wondered if you thought that had an effect on your curatorial work and your passion for the everyday.***

CD: Yeah, I'm sure it's been in conversation with that. I think that the work that I do to make a living, nursing, is really comprised of a lot of those kinds of in-between moments. As well as sort of helping people navigate an ordinary part of life while ill. So definitely I think it's connected. And I think that just that kind of attention to the small things comes into play, both in nursing and in this project of having this everyday life medium.

EK: ***Do you think that your curatorial practice is an act of care in a similar way to nursing, perhaps palliative care?***

CD: Interesting idea. I don't think that I've consciously thought of it that way. If anything, I sort of feel like curating the museum is sort of an act of archiving 'experience.' Like collecting and building, noticing. Documenting things that are often overlooked and that deserve our attention. But I think that's a form of care.

EK: ***Do you think of your curatorial practice as being artistic? As a built environment or a performance, as well as a collection?***

CD: The museum is definitely an art project in that way. It is both a performance and an installation and a built environment, and a creative expression of my interests, my train of thought. So for sure, yeah, I would say that it is.

EK: ***Do you think that the emphasis is on the individual objects in your curation, or on the broader message or feeling of them being assembled?***

CD: I think the museum actually is an affective experience. I don't think it's object-focused, but feeling-focused in a way. I think people go through the museum and they walk out of there having an emotional experience, you know, intellectually provoked for sure. But also, it's set up in a way that people have relational responses to the objects because they recognize them, and they recognize themselves in the stories associated with the objects. They are invited to view the objects with a renewed sense of wonder, rather than just sort of leaping over them the way we do in regular life, because we're busy and we just don't think about the button that we're buttoning or whatever. The museum is about going through and recognizing the relationships that come up when you take a close look at ordinary objects.

EK: ***Some objects in your exhibitions are pretty unaltered, and then some are assembled into composite works. Like the pencil arch or the safety pin curtain, or the key and mirrored dresses. What's behind those decisions?***

CD: Those decisions come from research and the work that's done in preparation for the exhibit around that specific object. You know, sometimes it's just an idea. Like keys are amazing, they have so many affordances they can make, they can add weight. They're so evocative. The idea of attaching them to a garment just seemed really fun and appropriate. So that's how that came about. Exploring things from the object itself. Some objects really lend themselves well to that sort of thing, and sort of are asking for it.

Outside view of Museum of Everyday Life, featuring toothbrush sculpture and surrounding enviroment, 2025.

Decorated hall at entrance to Museum of Everyday Life, 2025.

EK: ***How much involvement do visitors or people who donate objects have in the development of exhibitions? Is community building a priority?***

CD: Yeah. in a lot of different ways and to different extents. So the way it works is I come up with a theme for the special exhibition each year. Usually, I announce that theme in February, and I send out a call for submissions, and then I start hearing from people. I hear from all kinds of people in many different places all over. Some people just want to say to me, "Oh, if you're doing an exhibit about toothbrushes, don't forget about this idea," And they just give me something that I should remember or look into or understand about the object, and that's the last I hear from them.

Other people want to submit objects. So, like, "I really want my grandfather's toothbrush to be in the exhibit, because here's the amazing story around it." Other people have sort of vague ideas of things they want to do. Like, "I want to make a display about the relationship of the toothbrush to the sugar plantations." So each person is sort of different, the amount of back and forth, the amount of involvement that that person will have, and what actually goes up on display.

Then there's also these community work weekends during the actual installation, which takes place in the spring. I have these open workshop weekends where people can come and participate in the actual work of installing the exhibit, which includes everything from building walls, painting, and backfilling, to doing stuff on the museum grounds to get the area ready for visitors. To actually helping to construct some of the built items. Many, many people sewed the keys onto the key dress.

Other people get involved because they are sparked by the theme, and they want to offer a performance. So they know that we have events and opening celebrations around each special exhibition, so that they're like, "Oh, I really want to perform the toothbrush dance," or something like that. There's a lot of different avenues where people participate to a greater and lesser extent.

EK: ***What do you think is the benefit of these sorts of varied interactions and free associations, between people's stories or whatever they think of regarding a theme, that separates your museum from maybe more closed-off, larger institutions?***

CD: On the whole, it makes the exhibits more interesting. It's always more interesting to see something that comes from many minds than just one mind, I think. It makes the museum into part of a living and breathing organism. It really makes it malleable and changeable, and it really makes it open to the light at the moment. What's in the air? It makes it [the exhibit] influence people. It makes it just more of a living creature.

CD: And I also think it's part of the idea of creating a public space. My museum really tries to operate as a public space where people can do a certain kind of thinking and a certain kind of acting in concert with each other. Participation is what makes it meaningful. In order to have a meaningful public space, you have to have people in it and participating in it.

Clare Dolan, *Key Dress* and *Mirrored Dress* with accompanying labels, in permanent collections gallery. Museum of Everyday Life, 2025.


PERMANENT
COLLECTION
This way
(Up the hill and
to your left in the
upper part of the barn)

EK: ***I read in the Museum of Everyday Life book this philosophy: "The Museum of Everyday Life is the opposite of the institutional museum. The Museum of Everyday…carries her possessions on her back, inhabits temporary spaces, is always on the move." I also see that you have an exhibition on at ArtYard in Frenchtown, NJ,[1] which is being called a Museum of Everyday Life project. What is your philosophy around extending the museum to other spaces while maintaining the incarnation of the museum in Glover?***

CD: I think that was a little bit more metaphorically speaking. I'm talking about the tension between institutional museums that have such a stake in doing certain kinds of things, like reflecting national identity or housing objects that are associated with certain kinds of power. The institutional museum often has a lot of other things on its agenda that make it into a really rigid kind of place. What I was getting at with the idea of mobility is that when the museum is sort of curated in this way that it's binding to people in the moment. [The Museum of Everyday Life] is able to go in a lot of different directions that people are leading it. It's freer.

That being said, [literal mobility] certainly is still possible, and I have done Museum of Everyday Life installations in places other than that barn in Glover. It can be challenging to do that because sometimes a lot of what makes the museum work well is the fact that it's here in this dairy barn, in this deeply rural, out of the way place, and the fact that it has built up these relationships over time with its participants, so that people know how to interface with it and offer ideas and come and help build. Whereas, when I was going to do the exhibit in New Jersey, it took a while to sort of get people in the area to sort of understand what the project was and understand how they could be involved. There were certain challenges to it, too. But of course, I love the idea of sort of popping up in any kind of place, in a neighborhood, in a city, or in the corner window of a fast food restaurant, or a public beach. There are lots of possibilities.

(Upper Left), hand painted sign directing visitors from the temporary exhibits gallery to the permanent collections. Museum of Everyday Life, 2025.
(Lower Left), outside view of temporary exhibits gallery. Museum of Everyday Life, 2025.

1 *Deep Seated: Chairs & the Stories They Tell*. An exhibition exploring chairs as artifacts, objects, and the stories they carry with them. Curated by Clare Dolan at Artyard in Frenchtown, NJ. Ran from Oct. 18th 2025 to Feb. 8th 2026. www.artyard.org/exhibitions/deep-seated

EK: ***A tagline of the museum is "embarking on our mission of glorious obscurity." Is wayfinding to the relatively remote museum in Vermont part of that obscurity? Does the visitor's journey to the museum play a part in your curation?***

CD: The idea is that the museum isn't focused on objects of celebrity, or preciousness, or rare or famous things. It's focused on things like shoelaces and paperclips and brushes, but also the obscurity has to do with that. It's an obscure place, it's in a place that's not important to the map, a place that doesn't come up on lists of important places to go or anything like that. Definitely part of the fun and the pleasure in making the museum was looking at that model of the roadside attraction and how fun that is, that sense of discovery when you're driving along and then there's a sign that's like, "SEE PREHISTORIC SKELETON OF …" you know, and those sort of magical things which are often part shysters and part creative enterprise, art, like entertainment. Those things are really fun, and definitely the museum is a celebration of that and a reflection of that.

EK: ***Even though, like you said, Glover is not a traditional destination, you do have in the area a fair number of artistic enterprises. Incarnations of a sort of similar idea to your own. I know that you have a relationship with the nearby Bread and Puppet[2] and Main Street museums.[3] Why do you think so many places have chosen your area for these projects?***

CD: I was influenced by Bread and Puppet. I worked at Bread and Puppet for many years, and I continue to be involved with them in various ways now. Bread and Puppet is really sort of where I grew up as an artist and acquired a lot of my understanding of what vocabularies of expression interest me and what I think is important in life. I really think it was a formative experience for me. The fact that it's here and I'm here is just because I was attracted to that place and worked there for many years and then ended up settling nearby. I don't know if there's something particular to the northeast Kingdom of Vermont. But once a project is established, there's a place that people enjoy and take part in, it's almost like a gravitational pull. Other folks who are interested in that kind of project circle around and start doing projects of their own.

EK: ***I see a lot of similarities in how your museum operates and how the public side of Bread and Puppet operates, both being self-service and running on the honor system. An operating philosophy that extends from purchasing merchandise and giving donations, to turning on and off the lights, and to labels in place of stolen objects. As well as its practical purpose, what do you think this type of operation allows for your curation and the visitor's experience? I guess at both your museum and Bread and Puppet.***

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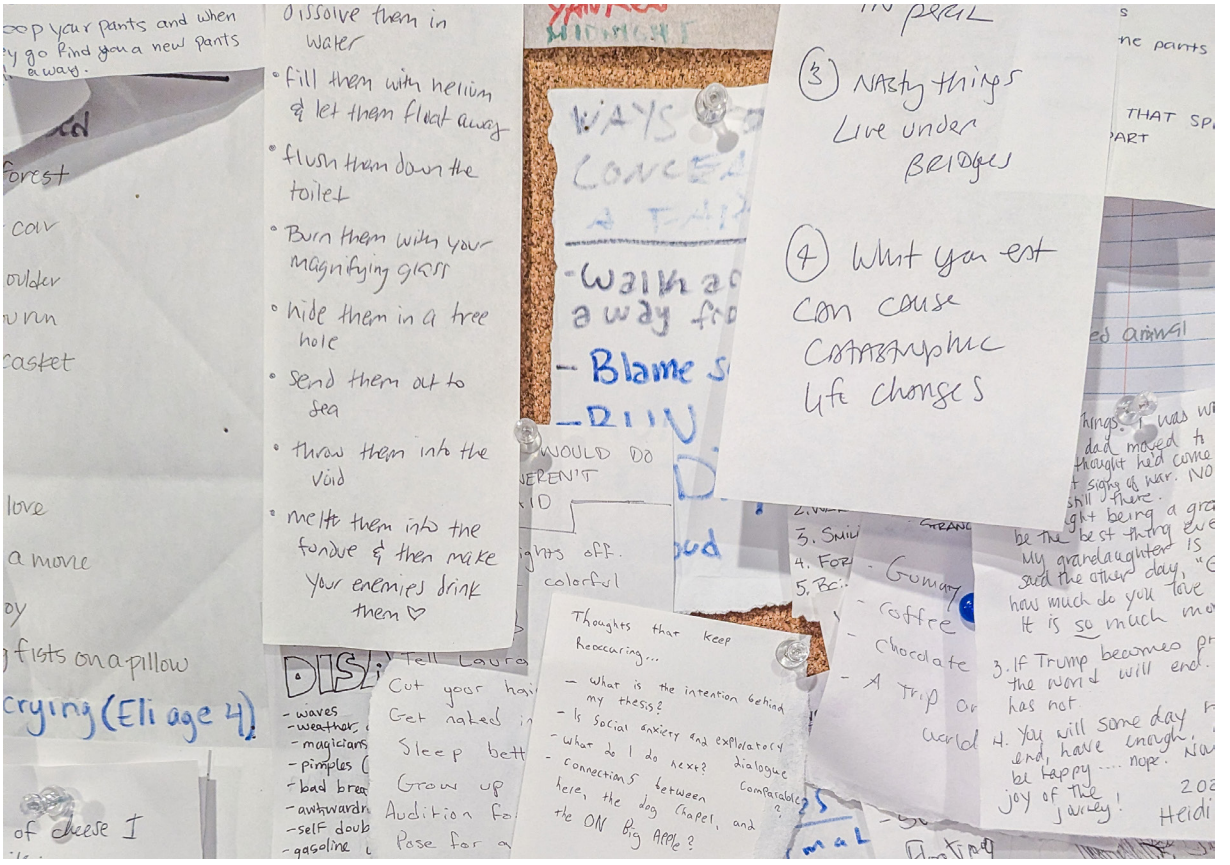
2 The Bread and Puppet Theater was founded in 1963 by Peter Schumann on New York City's Lower East Side. In 1974, Bread and Puppet moved to a farm in Glover, Vermont, where an old hay barn was transformed into a museum for retired puppets. Bread and Puppet continues to be one of the oldest, nonprofit, political theatre companies in the United States. www.breadandpuppet.org

3 The Main Street Museum in White River Junction, Vermont, was founded in 1992 by artist David Fairbanks Ford. The micro-museum operates as a modern cabinet of curiosities and a performance venue, with an emphasis on political activism. www.mainstreetmuseums.org

CD: I think it's part of the sort of grassroots and anarchic nature of the enterprise. We're not institutional museums, and we don't have to safeguard our objects. We don't have to make sure everyone pays. We're not operating under those kinds of constraints that big institutional places operate under. But it's also like a philosophical choice, right? It gets back to that question of public faith. We want to be a space that's inviting, that people take responsibility for, or ownership. In the act of turning on and off the lights and treating the space respectfully, it invites the kind of participation that is just different from what an institutional museum would invite.

Sculptural donations barrel and accompanying handpainted sign. Museum of Everyday Life, 2025.



Close-up view of comment card cork board. Museum of Everyday Life, 2025.

EK: ***So those labels for stolen objects?***

CD: That's just another example of how do you invite the viewer participant into the story? How do you help them realize that they're making a choice about how they interact with the work, and that others are making choices too, and that the choices of everybody are impacting that place? It's just a strategy to highlight that. And, for me, it's more interesting and more effective. I don't like [the idea of] putting up security cameras or looking like that.

EK: ***Now, hearing you speak on it, that philosophy reminds me of the performance piece 'Rhythm 0.' The Marina Abramović performance, where the audience was allowed to do whatever they wanted to her with the provided objects. That sort of idea of responsibility for another.***

CD: Yeah, some of the ownership and responsibility [is given] to the viewer participant.

EK: ***I saw that you provided comment cards for visitors. "A museum for people like me" seemed one of the more emphasized comments of those published in the museum's book. What experience do you intend for visitors, and is that reflected in the feedback you receive?***

CD: In the experience, I really want them to be moved in some way. One of the prompts in the survey is like "the museum made me feel, fill in the blank," right? So I'm definitely asking for that feedback and hearing about that. I think it is a space where people sort of have an experience rather than just look at stuff. And that does get reflected back in those in the comments.

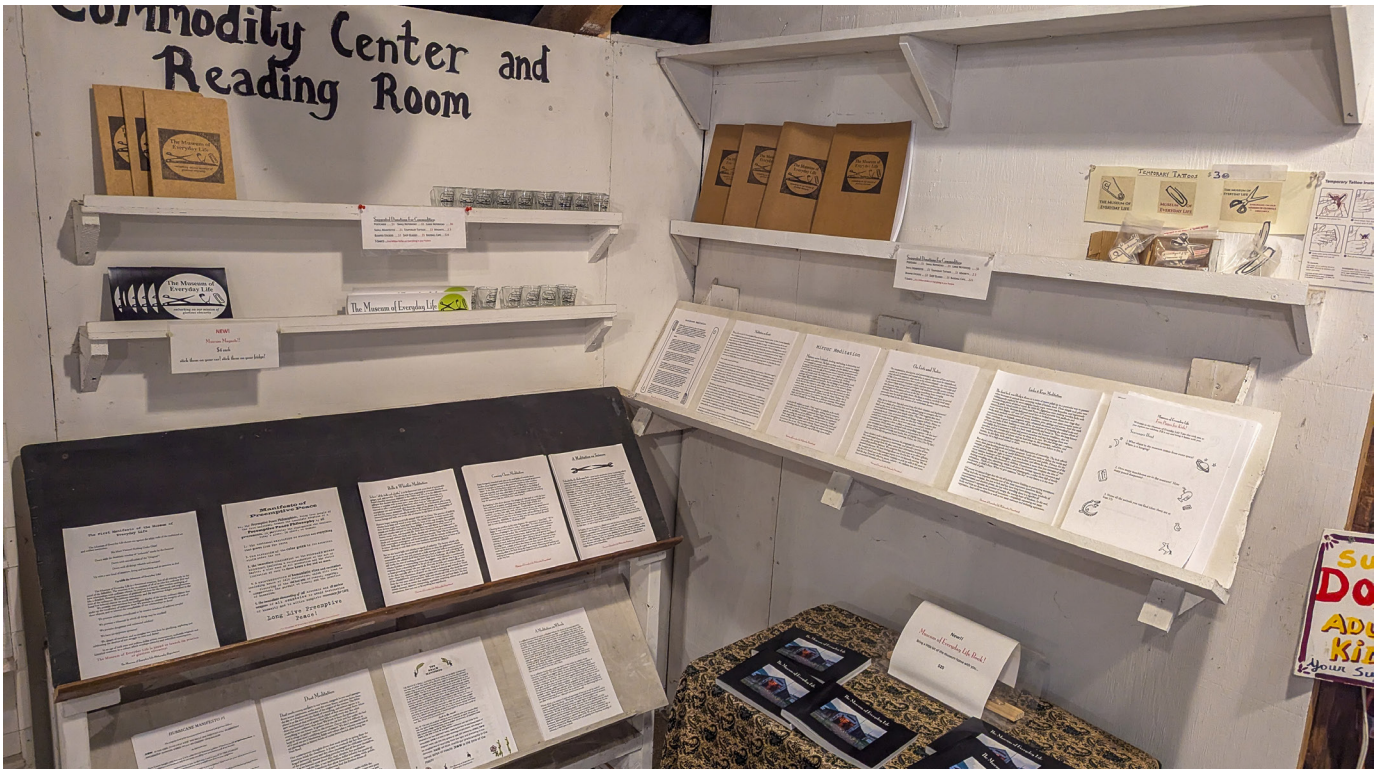
EK: ***What do you plan for the museum in the future?***

CD: The immediate plans are around achieving nonprofit status. I don't really have official nonprofit status, so I think I'm going to actually go for that. I'm going to try and assemble a board of directors and apply for a 501(c)(3). Making it into an actual nonprofit can be useful not just for purposes like receiving donations and support from people and entities, but also in terms of governance, like there might be a day when I don't want to or I'm not able to take care of the museum anymore myself. And I'm sort of realizing, well, it would be a shame if it all just disappeared when I disappear or when I'm no longer interested in it, because now it involves so many people and it has such a life. So, having a nonprofit would mean there'd be a group of people who are responsible for the museum instead of just me.

EK: ***In my research, I'm finding that the lifespans of certain projects like this can go in a lot of different directions as time goes on. It'll be interesting to see where the Museum of Everyday Life goes.***

Clare Dolan is a nurse and puppeteer whose enthusiasm for everyday life led to the creation of the Museum of Everyday Life, where she serves as the primary curator and chief operating philosopher. Her early interest in object collection, and her experiences as a touring puppeteer with the Bread and Puppet Theater during her formative years, inform the ever-expanding activity of the Museum as it pursues its mission of glorious obscurity.

Pencil archway, permanent collections. Museum of Everyday Life, 2025.



(Above), Commodity Center and Reading Room at the front of permanent collections gallery. Museum of Everyday Life, 2025.
(Below), Exhibition view of *Evidence, Residue, Memory: Stains,* curated by Clare Dolan. Running from May 31st, 2025 to present. Museum of Everyday Life, 2025.

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See Ferry Service

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North Cape
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Cape Tormentine
CAPE BRETON ISLAND
CAPE BRETON HIGHLANDS NATIONAL PARK
The Cabot Trail is scenic paved route
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Port Hood
Port Hawkesbury
Mulgrave
Chéticamp
Bras d'Or Lake
St. George's Bay
Antigonish
New Glasgow
Pictou
Stellarton
Westville
Truro
Springhill
Amherst
Pugwash
Tatamagouche
Guysborough
Canso
Chedabucto Bay
Sherbrooke
Stewiacke
Shubenacadie
Cobequid Bay
Minas Basin
LISCOMB GAME SANCTUARY
NOVA SCOTIA

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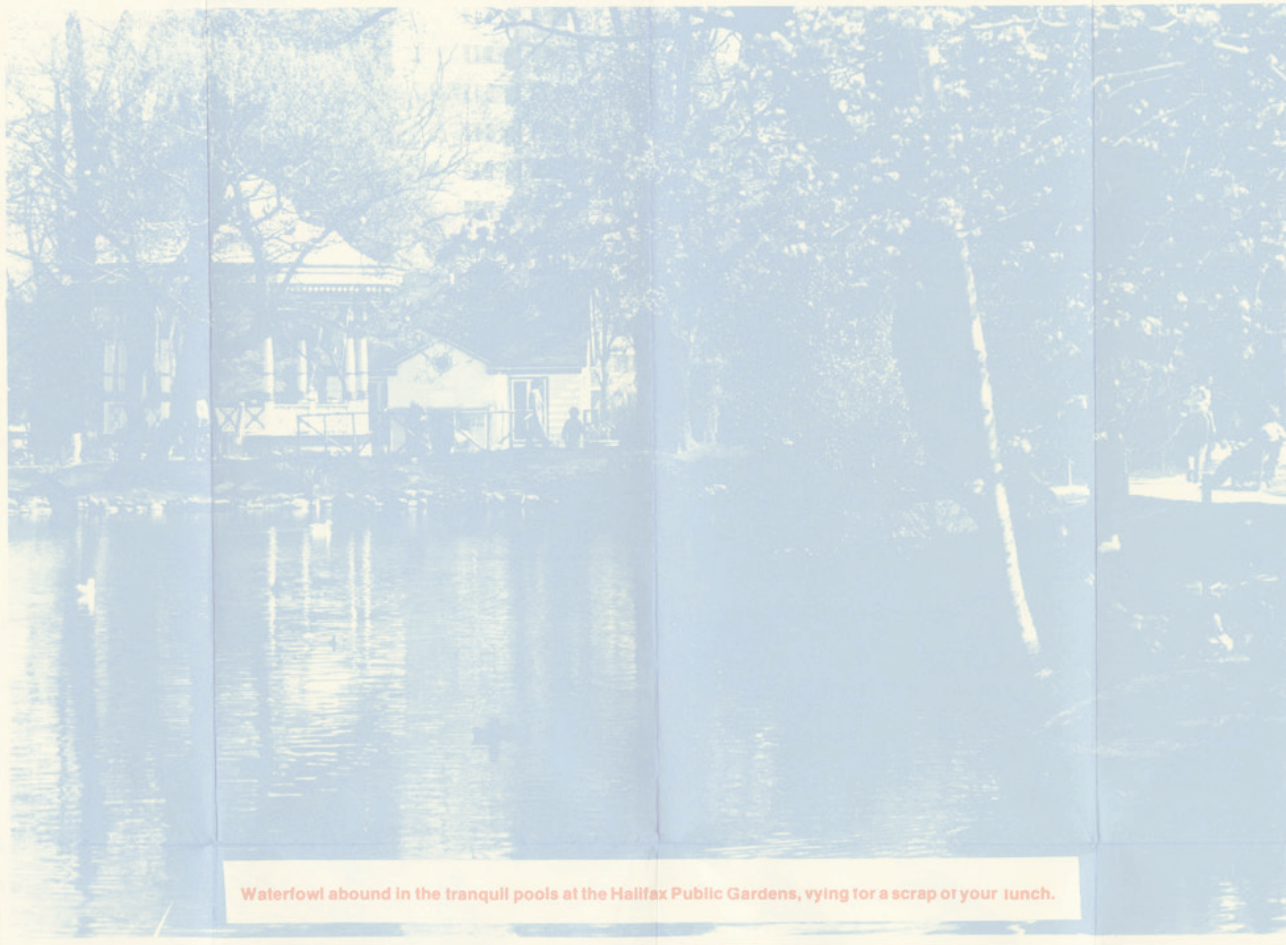

Waterfowl abound in the tranquil pools at the Halifax Public Gardens, vying for a scrap of your lunch.

ublic Gardens is a cool and beautiful place to relax in the centre of city activity.

The Bluenose II at rest