



PRESS RELEASE

A Natural Affinity for an Iconic Canadian Pioneer

Barbara Gamble's art exhibition at Canadian Museum of Nature reveals kinship with Catharine Parr Traill

OTTAWA – Ottawa artist Barbara Gamble's fascination with plants, flowers and trees as well as with 19th century pioneer Catharine Parr Traill has inspired a special exhibition, *Barbara Gamble: Natural Affinities*, which will open this fall at the Canadian Museum of Nature. Featuring over 50 of Gamble's oil paintings from 1995 to 2008, the show will be on view from October 10, 2008 to January 4, 2009.

From urban to wilderness settings, the Canadian landscape is the constant subject of Barbara Gamble's artwork. She paints what she knows best: the lakes, fields, hills and gardens of her surroundings. Gamble's technical process involves the multi-layering of coloured waxes onto canvas, wood or metal supports, creating luminous surfaces. An award-winning graduate of the University of Ottawa, she has exhibited in Ottawa, Vancouver, Toronto and New York. Her work is in numerous collections.

"A special addition will be two cases of precious botanical scrapbooks that Catherine Parr Traill prepared more than a century-and-a-half ago," says Gamble. "These rarely seen treasures, which have never been publicly exhibited, are being brought out of the Canadian Museum of Nature's vaults especially for this exhibition.

Traill and her sister Susanna Moodie are two of Canada's most important 19th-century writers. Born in England, they immigrated to Canada with their Scottish husbands in 1832, settled in the backwoods of Upper Canada (now Ontario) and wrote about the challenges of pioneer life.

Traill's love for plants and flowers and her concern about the damaging effect that the pioneers' bush-clearing had on nature deeply impresses Gamble. She feels that, while the two women are a century apart, they have a kind of "kinship" in their shared concern for nature. It was Gamble who asked the Museum to display the artifacts in the show.

"For me this is an honouring of Catharine Parr Traill as an individual, as a woman, as a pioneer and as a Canadian – all these things really resonated with me when I first saw the collection in 2003 in the Museum's archives."

Worried about vulnerable and disappearing species, Gamble incorporates them into her art by obtaining permissions to travel to off-limit preservation areas in Canada's parks to photograph her subjects. She is less concerned with visual accuracy in her paintings as she is in conveying a vital connection between herself, the painter, and these botanical treasures.

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“Our actions as individuals and communities have consequences in the natural world,” says Gamble. “I hope that my artwork might stimulate people to look at, think about and engage cooperatively with the world around them.”

In addition to the paintings and Catharine Parr Traill’s scrapbook pages of dried flowers and plant specimens, the exhibition also comprises other interesting features: a video clip; Gamble’s own gatherings of natural objects, shown in a cabinet from her studio; and charts, paintings and snapshots that document an ecological community project close to the artist’s heart – the greening of her community park in the 1990's.

An exhibition catalogue will be available for sale in the Museum’s Nature Boutique. Along with images of the artwork and an essay by curator Petra Halkes, the bilingual catalogue includes an interview with the artist by Claudia Chowaniec.

The Canadian Museum of Nature is located at 240 McLeod Street (corner of Metcalfe) in Ottawa. After Labour Day and until April 30, the Museum is open Tuesdays to Sundays from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Thursdays until 8:00 p.m. For more information on exhibitions and programmes, call 613-566-4700 or visit nature.ca.

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NOTE TO MEDIA: There will be a special preview of the exhibition for media on Thursday, October 9, 2008 from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. The artist will be available for interviews.

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BACKGROUND

Barbara Gamble: Natural Affinities

Featuring nineteenth-century specimens from Catharine Parr Traill's own herbarium collection

**Canadian Museum of Nature
October 10, 2008 to January 4, 2009**

(The following excerpts were taken from the curatorial catalogue essay: *Barbara Gamble: Natural Affinities*, by Petra Halkes)

Barbara Gamble does not sequester herself in her studio for very long. . . . painting is only one aspect—albeit an important one—of a community-oriented life that includes many people and many things, present and past. Organizing an exhibition with Gamble, I soon found out, is a process of *adding* rather than editing out. Representing nature, in Gamble's life, is inextricably connected to the sentient experiences of specific places, which are never just her own but are shared with people, animals, plants, flowers and insects, and the complex communities they create.

Gamble steadfastly paints her way through time-worn manners of representation, leaving behind certain materials and views, and, as she says, “composting” others that in some shape or form continue to play a part in the way she represents places in the landscape.

Her own [Gamble's] affinity for nature's own pattern-making clearly shows in the ad-hoc collections of natural objects, birds' nests, shells and skeletons of tiny creatures that are included in the exhibition. Also included is the trunk of a young birch tree from her garden that was killed by the bronze birch borer. She cleaned out the intricate insect grooves and filled them with red wax (2002).

Her interest in ecology remains unabated and has recently led her to search out protected areas—such as Point Pelee National Park—that contain species at risk as identified by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. One painting in this ongoing series stands out for the rare inclusion of a figure: *Ecologist in Lady's-slipper Fen* (2008). In an indistinct setting that is nonetheless rich in colour and texture, a smiling young woman looks us confidently in the eye. Except for the clip board that gives away her scientific mission, she looks like a regular hiker; someone we, and Gamble herself, can identify with.

Indeed, the *Ecologist* reflects Gamble's own attitude of openness, inclusiveness and steadfast belief in the power of cooperative action. The artist senses an ongoing communal need for the representation of natural places and refuses to let feelings of guilt about historical landscape painting's imperialist grip

on nature stand in her way. Working through nostalgic representations of landscape allows Gamble to communicate the need to rekindle a life-sustaining connection with nature to a wide public. Her art practice is about finding natural affinities to build a common ground from which to mend the troubled relationship between culture and nature.

At Gamble's request, and for the first time in the history of the Canadian Museum of Nature (CMN), a number of Catharine Parr Traill's many scrapbook pages of dried flowers and plant specimens from the Museum's collection are being publicly displayed. They form one of the loveliest inclusions in an exhibition that counts many others: a video clip; Gamble's own gatherings of natural objects, shown in a cabinet from her studio; and charts, paintings and snapshots that document an ecological community project. Each inclusion shows us in a different way how the experience of a specific place in the landscape is enriched by, and indeed *needs*, representation.

Traill was born in England in 1802; she and her husband Thomas settled in the wilderness of Upper Canada in the 1830s. Despite the hardships of pioneer life, and in addition to a writing career that rivaled that of her sister Susannah Moodie, Traill created a large number of scrapbooks with collections of plant specimens and other natural objects. More than 20 of these albums now form a treasured part of the CMN's National Herbarium of Canada. Her husband gathered a wildflower bouquet for her in 1832, when their ship stopped at an island in the St. Lawrence River; it was the first of many North American plant specimens she would collect and press over the course of her life (Peterman 2007:55).

Quotes from Barbara Gamble, from an interview with Claudia Chowaniec, June 2008:

“My art usually depicts the environment around and within my community. When people see my paintings, they can relate to what they see—yes, I know that lake; yes, I've seen that flower before.”

“I am preoccupied with the threatened ecosystem. Our actions as individuals and communities have consequences in the natural world. I hope that my artwork might stimulate people to look at, think about and engage cooperatively with the world around them.”

Gamble's quotations and opinions, reflected in this essay, are based on conversations between the artist and the author in October 2007.

*Petra Halkes (Ph.D., BFA) is the author of *Aspiring to the Landscape: On painting and the Subject of Nature*, published by the University of Toronto Press in 2006. She is a painter and independent curator, and writes regularly for Canadian art magazines. She is interested in finding out why archaic practices, such as painting the landscape, persist in contemporary culture.*