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MUSEUMS have long been under fire for exemplifying all that's wrong with Western civilization. As the purported emissaries of cultural elitism, museum curators are always being nailed by artists and critics — for their insensitivity to marginal voices, for pandering to corporate interests, for promoting narrow-minded theories about what's hot and what's not.

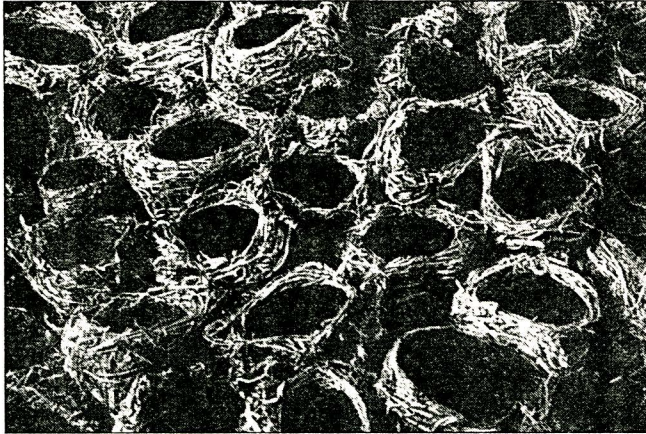
Jan Allen, the soft-spoken, articulate director of contemporary art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, had the bright idea of opening up what has become a rather one-sided debate. She invited Sarindar Dhaliwal — a Toronto-based artist with a skeptical take on the status quo — to curate her own show at the Agnes Etherington. The result is an engagingly eccentric exhibition with an intriguing title, *Of Mudlarkers and Measurers*. The show moved earlier this month to the Ottawa Art Gallery.

Dhaliwal was a smart choice for many reasons: her mixed cultural heritage (she was born in India, educated in England and emigrated to Canada in 1988); her political experience as a board member at the Art Gallery of Ontario; international contacts gained through teaching at the Banff Centre for the Arts; and, most important, her own penetrating, poetic intelligence.

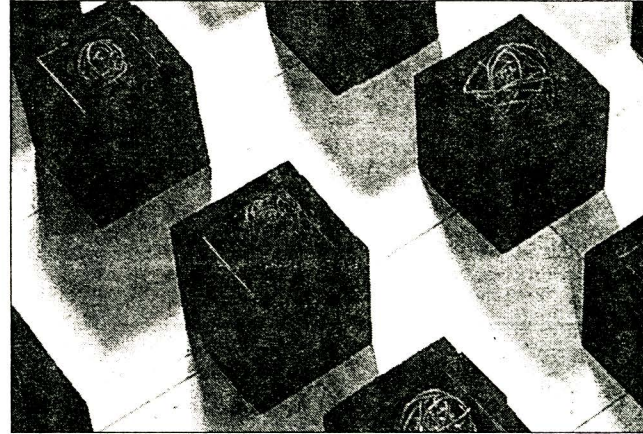
Dhaliwal chose five artists, all of whom share her own cross-cultural interests and a marked obsessiveness in their way of working. In Freud's day, they might have been pegged as mere neurotics. Now, of course, there is no shame in collecting bird's nests by the bale (Edmonton's Lyndal Osborne), stringing corncobs onto metal wire

## Five-artist show engagingly eccentric

ART REVIEW / *This exhibition is as much about the creators and their journeys as it is about the work.*



In *Point of Departure*, the artist has arranged 250 abandoned bird nests; beside are 65 small wooden boxes, with balls woven from copper wire.



(Colombia's Maria Fernanda Cardoso) or drawing weird projections of ordinary office spaces (Brazil's Regina Silveira), as long as it ends up as art.

Some make the leap more successfully than others, but their journeys are memorable nonetheless. Gwen MacGregor, the mudlarker referred to in the exhibition title, is a Canadian who travels to London, where she dons a pair of Wellingtons and dredges up buttons and other bits of historic detritus from the banks of the Thames. (Dhaliwal provides a fascinating brief history of mudlarking in the catalogue). For her 1996 work, *Not Here Not Now*, she made clay replicas of

the buttons and arranged them by colour on plastic trays in a wooden cabinet. Every day, gallery staff unload a handful of buttons into a glass container where they dissolve in water, eventually forming marbled layers of plum, tangerine and chrome green sediment.

This work has all the visual panache of a classroom science experiment, yet MacGregor's endeavour to make an imaginative connection to the forces of time and tides is a compelling one. The *de rigueur* dig at museology is there, too, although it seems a bit beside the point.

Osborne is yet another artist-scav-

enger. Two hundred and fifty abandoned bird nests arranged haphazardly on a long steel table testify to her favourite haunts, local fields and streams, a preoccupation which dates to her childhood in Australia. In *Point of Departure*, she rejects "Western notions of linear and canonical order," writes Dhaliwal, preferring to evoke natural phenomenon such as the ebb and flow of tides. On the floor beside the table are 65 small wooden boxes, crafted from old barn board, containing ornamental balls woven from scraps of copper wire. This frenzy of collecting, recycling and reordering seems slightly loony, until

one reflects that nature itself is constantly working similar metamorphoses.

The measurer in the show, Antoni Abad, uses the ancient unit of the hand as a way of connecting himself to the world. In *Minor Measures*, he casts his hand many times in aluminium and displays it in open and shut positions spanning a wall. In a short film strip projected in a small darkened gallery, his flesh-and-blood hand makes the same crab-like journey across another wall. The projection is accompanied by a lighted box containing a mundane account of a day-in-the-life ("The distance covered in waking up, getting up, pissing,

having a shower, brushing my teeth, getting dressed, going into the kitchen, making the coffee ..." and so on, ending with "reading some Vasari, setting the alarm, turning off the light, going to sleep, the 11th of August 1994.") This hypnotic work suggests the fragility of the links connecting one moment of existence to the next, and the terrifying, empty spaces in between.

A related series of works about measuring apparently grew out of the alienation Abad initially felt as a visiting artist in Banff several years ago. The creation of personal systems of order, often observed in cases of psychological trauma, can be a way of coping with cultural displacement. In *Minor Measures*, Abad's particular strategies become relevant to anyone trying to understand his or her place in the shifting ground of the modern world.

In creating a show which is as much about artists and their quests as it is about finished product, Dhaliwal departs from standard curatorial practice. Her eloquent commentaries, contained in one of the most beautifully produced small catalogues that I have encountered, are a necessary adjunct to the viewing of the show. Normally, since works of art are supposed to stand on their own, that would be considered a defect. But here it is a bonus, an acknowledgment that certain forms of art do draw their power from the personal histories of their makers. And so we relate as we would to a story in a novel, both to the art on the wall and to its evolution, becoming the richer for it.

*Of Mudlarkers and Measurers continues at the Ottawa Art Gallery until June 29.*