



Begging a second look

PROVOCATIVE CREATIONS CAUSE STIR
IN GALLERIES — AND ON HIKING TRAILS

By Sam Toman

MOST VISUAL ARTISTS feel they have made it when their work is featured in a renowned gallery and declared genius by the goatee-stroking art world types who decide these things. For local artist Ann Marie Hadcock, her moment of recognition came without the renowned gallery, goatees or even walls.

It happened in 2011 as Hadcock and her mother were enjoying a picnic on the Bruce Trail near Tobermory. As small

packs of hikers wandered by, the two women were watching them react to something puzzling in the underbrush.

Among the rocks and bushes was a big red fibrous ball. The curiosity looked organic, but was too brightly coloured to be natural. It was too delicately crafted to be garbage, and placed with too much care to be a mistake. Then, a particularly knowledgeable hiker figured it out. “This is art,” she said. “This is an Ann Marie Hadcock.”

The woman was correct. Middle-of- ▶

Ann Marie Hadcock creates art that is tactile and meant to be touched — and puzzled over.

Photography • Doug McMillan



In a Kitchener studio, Ann Marie Hadcock creates by layering and wrapping materials together.

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► nowhere Ontario might seem like an unusual place to find a cutting-edge work of art, but that's because Hadcock is an unusual artist.

Sitting in her studio in a converted warehouse near Hillside Park in Kitchener, her eyes light up as she describes the joy she gets out of her process.

Since 2009 Hadcock has ventured into the woods to set up her unique pieces of art on rocky beaches, near narrow trails and in thick brush. Then, hiding in plain sight, she stays close by to watch people react to what they are seeing.

Hadcock's art is tactile and meant to be touched and puzzled over. Her art is about ideas. Through a process of layering and wrapping different artificial materials together, she creates structures that integrate into their environment, but also stand out and draw attention.

Hadcock has nothing against traditional galleries — far from it. Since she launched

her professional career as a visual artist roughly three years ago, her work has been featured at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, Museum London and the Harbourfront Centre in Toronto (where the knowledgeable hiker had first spotted her work).

Hadcock's decision to showcase her art on the Bruce Trail was as much practical as it was instinctual. Hadcock grew up on the Bruce Peninsula, and was back that summer — like every summer since 1999 — to work at the family bakery in Tobermory. When not measuring flour or baking butter tarts, her attention would turn to her artwork and the practical challenges of bringing her ideas to life.

"There is not a lot of studio space up there," Hadcock says of the small tourist town at the tip of the Bruce. The great outdoors offered a studio space that was free, inspirational and offered a built-in audience. "When I saw people interacting with it, I realized it was a great way of showing my work."

For Hadcock, the environment her art is assembled in, whether that is a sterile gallery, or a swampy marsh, informs the art itself.

"Every time I go into a space, whether it is internal or external, I am actually building on the spot or composing in the space," Hadcock explains. "I never know what the end is going to be because the space talks to me and tells me what I am building. It is a challenge every time I go to a new place."

Going to new places and meeting challenges have defined much of Hadcock's life. When she was just nine years old, her family had little choice but to leave their home in Hamilton when her parents could no longer find work in the local factories. With the entire country as their oyster, the whole Hadcock family, including Ann Marie and her twin sister Jessie Lorraine, sat down to consider their options. Having already spent summer vacations on the Bruce Peninsula, the twins picked Wiarton as their preferred destination.

"We thought about the most wonderful place where we would run around and have all of this space, especially compared to Hamilton where the choice was to live next to the steel factory," Hadcock remembers. "We automatically said we wanted to go to the Bruce because we loved it there."

And that was that. The family packed up their things, moved north and eventually opened the Little Tub Bakery in Tobermory.

With little extra money for expensive extracurricular activities, Hadcock's parents turned to art to keep Ann Marie and her sister stimulated in their new home. Her



parents, who recognized creative talent in their daughters early on, would send the girls into the woods with paper, crayons and high expectations.

"They didn't sugar-coat it for us," Hadcock says of her parents' criticism of their work. "They have always had this attitude that if you are going to do something, you should always try to be the best at it. My father taught sports, and to have a creative child was a challenge for him."

Regardless of the occasional critical flop, a seed had been planted, and Ann Marie Hadcock set about her journey to becoming an artist. The first step was leaving the nest and enrolling at Fanshawe College. With its challenging and influential fine arts programs, Fanshawe was no haven from criticism either. The nascent drawing skills she had accrued in northern Ontario were no match for the technical skills of her highly trained peers.

It was there that Hadcock came to a realization that would propel her beyond her classmates and onto the cutting edge.

"I would look at other students drawing and think, 'Oh no!'" Hadcock recounts. "But one of my professors said to me, 'In the end you are going to be the artist because you can think, and some of these people can only draw. And in the end, if you can think, you can be an artist.'"

With thick framed glasses, paint ringing her fingernails and radiating a generous energy, the Ann Marie Hadcock of today has certainly become that artist. On the other side of the studio sits Sophia Solaris, a German-born artist with whom Hadcock shares her space.

"Every day she comes in with a new idea. Some she follows . . . some she does not," Solaris says of Hadcock, with a knowing grin that hints at a deep bond the two share as artists and friends.

"To me, the nicest moment is when she starts, and you see material lying around. There are so many possibilities," say Solaris who, maybe more than anyone, gets to see just how Hadcock thinks. "Then you realize what she is doing and how it is such



In this photo, supplied by the artist, one of Ann Marie Hadcock's pieces lounges on rocks, ready to catch the eye of surprised hikers on the Bruce Trail.

a great way to use those materials."

How the two women came to share this small space in a converted warehouse would sound familiar to most artists living and working locally.

Fresh out of school, and eager to get started, Hadcock's choice to come to Kitchener was rooted in the same practical decision-making that led her family north two decades earlier. "I had no money, and no resources," she explains. "I had to start from scratch and my sister was living here working as a producer for the Jeff Allan Show on 570News. I slept on her couch for about almost three months. An excessive amount of time."

Eventually, Hadcock found affordable studio space and part-time work as an art instructor, which gave her just enough flexibility to work on her pieces. "My first studio space had giant windows and beautiful hardwood floors . . . but no heat and too many stairs," she says. "I probably shouldn't talk about it because it is kind of clandestine."

When pressed for more details, Hadcock refuses to give up its location. "All I can say is that it is this secret downtown art bunker and I think every artist in

Kitchener has been there."

Though the space wasn't perfect, it allowed Hadcock to get her feet planted in the community — a community she now (almost) fully embraces. "I like the affordability of Kitchener still. I have lived here for quite a few years and it feels like home. I guess I am a seasonal local here," she says.

Affordable space is still a concern, however. Having moved out of the freezing secret art bunker and into the converted warehouse she now works in, Hadcock is still feeling an economic squeeze.

"Now that the tech industry is exploding here, a lot of old factory space is being converted into offices. Our building is on the edge of what's been designated an innovation district . . . so where are we going to go next? Chicopee?" Hadcock says laughing nervously.

The statement registers not so much as a complaint, but as a challenge. Building something new and adapting to new environments is a key feature of Hadcock's art and her life. She wouldn't have it any other way.

"The work is transient. It has its life and it moves on. There is something beautiful about art that isn't meant to last forever. I like having a new experience and then it changes into something else." 