TORONTO STAR

Entertainment

In photographer Diana Thorneycroft's *Lake and Mountains with Double-Double*, an action figure of a GI Joe-style hunter takes sight, Tim Hortons cup and doughnuts close at hand, in the shadow of the heroic Lawren Harris image *Lake and Mountains*.

Great Canadian art finally good for a laugh

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VISUAL ARTS REPORTER

Sending up the sacred Group of Seven gives starkly new feel to McMichael Gallery

KLEINBURG—Earlier this week, a troop of mostly white-haired docents-in-training perused the expansive galleries of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, in search of the Canadian culture equivalent of divine inspiration: Thomson and Harris, Casson and Jackson, charter members of Canada's most revered herd of sacred cows, the Group of Seven.

What they found, though, was Diana Thorneycroft, who is fast-becoming known as this country's most engagingly provocative sacred cow-tipper. Thorneycroft was putting the finishing touches on her new show at the McMichael, *Canada, Myth and History*. It's the polite title for a collection of photographs she calls her "Group of Seven Awkward Moments Series."

Each is a study in sardonic blasphemy: Thorneycroft uses famous works by the Group and their contemporaries as backdrops, and then, using props, dolls and an acid wit, builds contemporary scenarios at distant odds from the Group's rendering of the sublime.

How distant? Take Bob and Doug McKenzie, say, guzzling beer from a cooler while surrounded by wolves. And awkward? Try the Tom Thomson trilogy, which greeted the docents as they entered the exhibition — along with Thorneycroft herself, a spirited and cheerful presence with close-cropped dark hair and glasses, who was only too happy to offer a walk-through.

Legend has it, Thorneycroft explained, that Thomson was found by a doctor, floating face-down in a lake. Rumours of foul play were dismissed, and the theory that Thomson fell out of his canoe prevailed.

Thorneycroft's images offers a different view: One, of Thomson in a tent, entangled with a spoken-for woman while her jealous boyfriend looks on; in the next, Thomson re-

MCMICHAEL continued on **E6**

Old work seen in new light

MCMICHAEL from E1

lieves himself in his canoe while a bear holds a megaphone — "I think he's trying to say 'sit down, you're going to fall in!' " she explains, to a peal of docent giggles); and in the final image, Thomson floats in the water, face-down, as the boyfriend watches from shore — justice, in some form, served.

Not exactly the sanctity we've come to expect from the McMichael — at last, some would say (the docents, for their part, broke into applause as Thorneycroft finished).

It's been a tough decade or so: In 1996, the Robert and Signe McMichaels, sued the province. They had donated their Kleinburg estate, and 179 works, mostly by the Group and their contemporaries, to the province in 1965; over the years, as a public museum, it had ballooned to 5,500 pieces, many of them contemporary, which, the McMichaels argued violated the terms of their original gift.

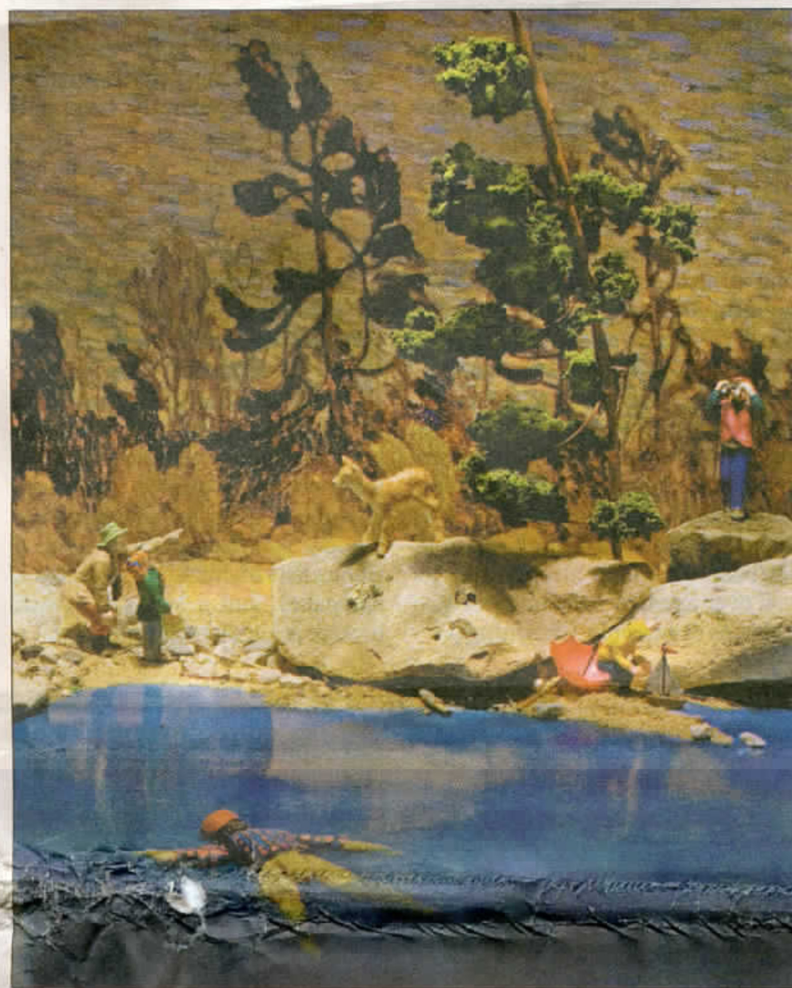
They pushed their suit to the Supreme Court, which in 2000 refused to hear it. But the Progressive Conservative government under Mike Harris gave the McMichaels control over their original collection in 2001, and a permanent des-

Thorneycroft's "Beavers and Woo at Tanoo" (above) is a reimagining of Emily Carr's "Tanoo, Queen Charlotte Islands" in which Carr's beloved totem poles are fodder for beavers and loggers. In another series of images, Thorneycroft invents a melodrama behind the mysterious death of Tom Thomson.

> *Let's not keep him on a pedestal — let's bring him into the conversation.*
>
> DIANA THORNEYCROFT TO A.J. CASSON'S DAUGHTER

ignate on the gallery's board, to help enforce their mandate.

It put the gallery in limbo. But when Signe died, in 2007 (Robert predeceased her, in 2003), the designate position vanished, and the McMichael started to emerge from its doldrums. "It really is a time when we're challenging traditions throughout the organization," said Tom Smart, the McMichael's director and CEO. "We're engaged in the broader discussion of contemporary Canadian art again, and that's exactly where we should be."



The rocky history in mind, it's impossible to under-emphasize the significance of Thorneycroft's show to the institution's identity: Alongside her images are some of the original paintings she used as backdrops — an act of apparent sacrilege that would have been impossible here only a few years ago.

The charm of the series is that it isn't simply a send-up, but a gentle interweaving of disparate sensibilities that allow the old work to be seen in a new way. Smart says Thorneycroft is working much as the Group themselves did, almost a century ago: rendering the vistas of Georgian Bay or coastal icebergs into icons of the Canadian identity.

Thorneycroft offers a new landscape, altered by the onrush of consumer entertainment culture that's as much a part of our identity — like it or not — as the mythic landscapes we've clung to for generations. In "Lake and Mountains with Double-Double," a hunter takes sight, Tim Hortons cup and doughnuts close at hand, in the shadow of a heroic Lawren Harris image.

Or, in what might be the show's finest moment, Thorneycroft takes a large canvas from iconic west coast painter Emily Carr — a Group contemporary, and sometime collaborator — and casts it in a tragicomic frame: Carr's original painting, "Tanoo, Queen Charlotte Islands," shows three Haida totem poles set back from a foreground strewn with driftwood. In Thorneycroft's reimagining of the piece, "Beavers and Woo at Tanoo," a totem has been chewed to the ground; as the beavers eye the next one a logger, chainsaw in hand, advances. Above, Woo — Carr's real-life pet monkey — swoops in over the scene, carried by an eagle.

The implication is both obvious — Carr's heroicization of the coastal landscape and people, cheapened by commercialization and logging — and subtle: What good is a culture fossilized beyond re-reading?

Until recently, the latter had become the McMichael's unfortunate specialty. No longer. Smart calls Thorneycroft's show "a bellwether for what we're trying to do here."

It's hard to imagine a flag for that more firmly planted. Over the past decade, she's been establishing herself as a contemporary photographer with a mind to iconoclasm at the core of her work.

Her series on the deaths of martyrs (St. Peter, John the Baptist) rendered brutal acts of Christian mythology with playthings — dolls, once again, tortured to their agonizing end.

At the McMichael, Thorneycroft's trademark dark humour is an open invitation to all. It reads at first as self-conscious parody, a gentle roasting of a set of icons that have always been held beyond reproach.

But past the laughs, there's a significant comment on culture-building here, in a country whose identity crisis is the stuff of legend. We cling to the Group as untouchable beacons of nationalism, she says, at the risk of abandoning the contemporary conversation.

One of her pieces, "Winter on the Don," uses the A.J. Casson painting of the same name as a backdrop for an ill-fated pond hockey match, with Curtis Joseph, Guy Lafleur, Bobby Hull — and Bobby Orr plunging through the ice. Casson's daughter had to agree to the painting being used. Thorneycroft recounts the case they made: "Because your dad is so revered, we want to include him in the discourse," she said. "Let's not keep him on a pedestal — let's bring him into the conversation."

It's been a narrow conversation that Thorneycroft, to her own amazement, is helping to broaden. Looking around the gallery — her work amid the icons, side by each — she can't help but grin.

"It's sort of nuts, isn't it?" she smiles. "But I think things are in place now. This place has lacked contemporary art, and it's lacked a sense of humour. And it needs it."