

BY FISH GRIWKOWSKY, EDMONTON JOURNAL JULY 21, 2013

Latitude 53 exhibit humanizes Edmonton's York Hotel (with photos) Photographic and sculptural installation captures tragedy, real life



This is Blue Room. Sydney Lancaster and Marian Switzer have created a collaborative photo and sculpture installation, YORK, at Latitude 53 based on their visits to the condemned and troubled hotel a year after it was shut down. It runs July 25 -Aug. 31.

PREVIEW YORK Artists: Sydney Lancaster and Marian Switzer Where: Latitude 53, 10242 106th St. When:

Thursday through Aug. 31

It's fair to say not everyone wants to remember the York Hotel. Notorious, questionably fit to inhabit and infested with crime, the 1913 building which began as the St. Petersburg Hotel became a hub of murder, violence and political controversy, ultimately deemed unfit to live in, tactically purchased by the city and shuttered in 2010. In its infamous years, police would often need to visit the 10401 96th St. bar several times a day, a

bathroom wall was torn down to reduce trafficking, and hard drugs were as common as bedbugs and artless vandalism. One legend has the house band playing Mack the Knife as a murder victim lay stabbed dead on the floor.

But like all stories, there's more to it than the official dogma. Two Edmonton artists are transmitting the fact that this place was also somewhere people — now spread to the four winds — called home.

Latitude 53's YORK is a fascinating photographic and sculptural installation by Sydney Lancaster and Marian Switzer, on from Thursday through Aug. 31. Using life-size enlargements of abandoned living spaces and casts of some of the objects left behind, the two are not so much memorializing the three-storey brick building as demonstrating an artful act of anthropological journalism, capturing tiny moments of hope and tragedy and certainly humanizing the York away from grim statistics.

Life-size enlargements printed on opaque silk are mounted on glass within a frame. The photos are straightforward and unmanipulated, though printed on fabric properly visible only from certain angles, playing on the fact these rooms are now erased from existence.

"It was dangerous," Lancaster, 51, admits. "It was a crime magnet and huge drain on resources for the downtown police."

But, she observes, tenants taped up superhero imagery, photos from magazines and radio station stickers on the walls and mirrors. The explorers also found toys and diaper wipes, condoms and needle boxes, and a compelling hidden shrine of ornaments. "There was poetry on the walls, not just graffiti, but people expressing themselves, people trying to tell their stories. That's what really drew me to it. This has to be captured. This is going to go away."

"There were a lot of people over the years who didn't have a voice, who were silenced in one way or another, and those stories need to be told."

Lancaster, working at Latitude 53 at the time, first toured the site when the gallery was looking for new digs. The city had initially tried to save the historic building, as part of the revitalization of downtown east. But saving the York was clearly unworkable. "One room we were in had black mould all over the walls. If there's mould on the walls, you better believe the bed and linens and carpets were not in good shape."

"It was a tenement hotel, a rooming house, but despite that, what came through to me walking through those rooms was a larger human impulse for survival, for resilience and that impulse to mark territory and take what little you may have and make home out of it."

Funded by the Edmonton Arts Council's community investment grants program, Lancaster and Switzer were allowed to move through and document the rooms, shortly before the hotel's destruction. Neither was precisely sure what they'd find or how they'd feel about it.

Displaced tenants had left personal things behind, as if a siren rang in the night and they had mere moments to run. “It was a really eerie thing, walking through these rooms,” says Lancaster.

“The building had been abandoned for a year, but the toothbrushes were still by the toilet, the beds were still made and it looked like somebody was just about to come back,” notes Switzer.

In fact, someone did. “The police had swept through and we knew there were city people working on the space, but we weren’t aware there might still be people squatting in there. We still ran into a couple of people hiding in random corners. We thought we were all alone taking pictures and we heard someone walking down the stairs.”

A man turned the corner holding Switzer’s camera. “Oh, hi!” she remembers, laughing, noting that there was a big butcher knife on the ground by his feet.

Here’s where this project gets really philosophically interesting, the idea of a likely homeless stranger walking in on the artists going through rooms that were once people’s homes. Permission given or not, the tension of invasion certainly expands outward through the artists, all the way out to us viewing the art. Imagine your bedroom showing up in a gallery. Aware of this, Lancaster stresses that the two artists approached the subject matter with respect and caution.

“It was very important for me going through that space not to helicopter in as the middle-class white chick who thinks she knows better. And there’s a potential for a very voyeuristic quality here. We were very concerned with reclaiming those fragmented narratives. I would never presume to speak for these people who I never met, but I wanted to take away something that maybe articulated a little bit of their voices with what we were doing.

“It’s very tricky.”

“We had permission by the city to be there,” notes Switzer, “but we felt like we were the trespassers.”

Immersed in echoes, both artists feel what Switzer expresses of the anonymous inhabitants: “I wish that we could find some of them. Where did they end up?”

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