



RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR PHOTOS

Artist Bill Burns with some of his work, on display at MKG127 on Ossington Ave., until Dec. 18. He'll be shearing a sheep as part of the exhibition, too.

# Bill Burns' shear artistry

Protective gear for critters, carved logs and sheep shearing form art

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VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

On Dec. 11, Bill Burns hopes to claim a Toronto art-world first: "We're planning to do a sheep shearing," he says matter-of-factly, in his soft, understated deadpan. "Right here in the gallery."

"At least, we think it's a first," says Michael Klein, who owns MKG127, the gallery where Burns' new show opened recently. "If there's another gallery out there shearing sheep, could you let us know?"

It seems a pretty safe bet. With Burns it usually is. As an artist, he's happy to engage the Really Big Issues that both vex our complex modern world and, as a consequence, run through a lot of contemporary art. But his take is ever and only his.

Take his best-known work, *Safety Gear for Small Animals*, a corporation (Burns is the director) committed to making — you guessed it — protective gear for critters unable to cope with a natural environment under siege by humanity's urge to pave, douse with carbon emissions, or generally defile.

Its product catalogue lists things like tiny work gloves for gophers rubbed raw from digging in unforgiving ground and wee life jackets for squirrels and chipmunks beset by the increasing frequency of dire flooding in their forest habitats.

Utterly absurd — enough so that, in a 1996 *Simpsons* episode, Homer became a conceptual artist making, ahem, safety gear for small animals, two years after Burns showed the work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York — *Safety Gear* had at its core a genuine environmental concern. And it's certainly a reading Burns doesn't dispute.

"John Baldessari," a towering figure in conceptualism, "said that usually the most important thing about a work of art is the most obvious. That's a maxim I like," Burns says, an impish smile. "Though I don't always go with it."

Oh? Standing in the Ossington Ave. gallery, Burns surveys his latest



Bill Burns' stacked, carved logs make a statement about the nature of Canadiana, the artist says.

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BILL BURNS

work. In one corner, a stack of logs is neatly arranged next to a portable work bench, denoting its work-in-progress status. Some of the logs have a name carved into them in a folksy, hand-wrought font. Baldessari is there. So is British art world kingmaker Charles Saatchi. Jerry Saltz, the art critic for *New York Magazine* and a panelist on the ditzy reality show *Work of Art*, gave the thumbs-up of his own engraving, on a spindly alder branch, when he saw it on Facebook.

You can look at Burns' new project as something of a recovery effort, taking all this heady conceptual business out to the woodshed. Big ideas and even bigger money taught an abject lesson in the value of raw

material and simple, honest work.

But with Burns, is it ever really that simple?

"I wanted to play around with the idea of Canadiana," Burns says. "We're a resource economy but also how we sell that idealized view of ourselves abroad, as part of the tourist economy."

In other words, even the most basic basics nature has to offer us become entangled in a complex game of perception versus reality. While we may continue to live off the land — just look at how much the value of our dollar is tied to the price of oil — the order of magnitude has changed, from hearty lumberjacks tromping into the forests to billion-dollar industries reliant on mass webs of global trade.

Into this, Burns inserts art, an economy unto itself with no such pretense of simplicity. Value is assigned not in weight, barrels or board-feet, but arbitrarily on a best guess of supply and demand (which, as Saatchi would attest, can be manipulated like stock values on the NASDAQ). Practicing his own

arbitrary — and provocative — value system, Burns includes his very own ranking system of the top 100 most important people in art.

And the sheep? After it's shorn — Burns is a first-timer, so attend at your own risk — the artist will collect the wool tufts and install them in small velvet-lined boxes. There's that reversal again: Wool is a raw material for useful consumer products like clothing; art is entirely useless, but somehow more valuable.

With this work, Burns seems to say what too many people feel: that art exists outside any reasonable economic ecosystem that puts dollar values on material, labour and craft.

By making material and labour explicit — aside from the shearing, Burns will spend a few hours every Saturday demonstrating log carving — Burns inserts art into the "real" economy.

"There is a discourse that's really hoping there's something useful to art," Burns says, a shy grin. "I think if you give up on that, that's your best bet."