Great Canadian art finally good for a laugh

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KLEINBURG—Earlier this week, a
troop of mostly white-haired do-
cents-in-training pressed the ex-
pansive galleries of the McMichael
Canadian Art Collection, in search
of the Canadian culture equivalent
of divine inspiration: Thomson and
Harris, Casson and Jackson, char-
ter members of Canada’s most re-
vered herd of sacred cows, the
Group of Seven.

What they found, though, was Di-
ana Thorneycroft, who is fast-bec-
coming known as this country’s most
engagingly provocative sac-
cred cow-tipper. Thorneycroft
was putting the finishing touches on
her new show at the McMichael,
Canada, Myth and History. It’s the

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

polite title for a collection of pho-
tographs she calls her “Group of Sev-
en, Awkward Moments Series.”

Each is a study in sarcastic blas-
phemy: Thorneycroft uses famous
works by the Group and their con-
temporaries 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, gazing beer from a
cooler while surrounded by wolves.

And awkward? Try the Tom Thom-
son trilogy, which greeted the de-
cents 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 ex-
plained, that Thomson was found
by a doctor, floating face-down in a
lake. Rumours of foul play were dis-
missed, and the theory that Thom-
son fell out of his canoe prevailed.

Thorneycroft’s images offers a dif-
ferent view. One of Thomson in a
tent, entangled with a spoken-for
woman while her jealous boyfriend
 LOOKS on. In the next, Thomson re-

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Lives 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 the peal of decent giggles; and in the final image, Thomason 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 least, some would say — the docents, for their part, broke into applause as Thornycroft finished.

It’s been a tough decade or so. In 1996, the Robert and Signe McMichael sued the province. They had donated their Kleinburg estate, and 179 works, mostly by the Group and their contemporaries, to the province in 1966; over the years, as a public museum, it had ballooned to 5,000 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 designation 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 2000), the docent position vanished, and the McMichael started to emerge from its doldrums. “It really is a time when we’re reinvigorating traditions throughout the organization,” said Tom Smart, the McMichael’s director and CEO. “We’re engaged in the broader discussion of contemporary Canadian art, and that’s where we should be.”

The story is one of a palpable sense of the significance of Thornycroft’s show to the institution’s identity. Alongside her images are some of the original paintings she used as backdrops for her paintings, paintings of mountain scenery that would have been impossible here only a few years ago.

The charm of the series is that it isn’t theatrical in any way, but a gentle interweaving of disparate sensibilities that allow the old work to be seen in a new way. Smart says the Thornycroft Canadian art again, as the Group themselves did, almost a century ago: rendering the vistas of Georgian Bay or coastal islands into iconic images of the Canadian identity.

Thornycroft 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 mythical landscapes we’ve clung to for generations. In “Lake and Mountains with Double-Tooth,” a hunter takes aim, a swimmer in a canoe glides down the river, and in the shadow of a heroic Lawrence Harris image.

Or, in what might be the show’s finest moment, Thornycroft takes a large canvas from iconic west coast painter Emily Carr — a Group contemporary, and sometime collaborator — and casts it in a tragi comically frame. Carr’s original painting, “Tanoo, Queen Charlotte Islands,” shows three Haida totem poles set back from a foreground stream with driftwood. In Thornycroft’s reimagining of the piece, “Beavers and Woo at Tanoo,” a teddy bear has been thrown to the ground, as the beaver eye the next one a logger, chainsaw in hand, advances. Above, Woo — Carr’s real-life pet monkey — swipes in over the scene, carried by an eagle.

The impetus is both obvious — Carr’s heroization of the coastal landscape and people, cheapened by commercialization and logging — and subtile: What good is a culture fossilized beyond re-reading? Until recently, the latter had become the McMichael’s unfortunate specialty. No longer. Smart calls Thornycroft’s show “a bold departure 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) renderd brutal acts of Christian mythology with playthings — dolls once again, tortured to their agonizing end.

At the McMichael, Thornycroft’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 unattainable, as we have said, 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 go to the painting being used. Thornycroft re counts the case: “They made the decision because your dad is so revered, we want to include him in the course,” she said. “Let’s not keep him on a pedestal — let’s bring him into the conversation.”

It’s been a narrow conversation that Thornycroft, to her own amazement, is helping to broaden. Looking around the gallery — the work amid the ice, side by side — 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 lost its contemporary art, and it’s lacked sense of humour. And it needs it.”