

EDMONTON - I love to amble about an artist's studio, the earthbound milieu where the divine unfolds, eager to glimpse into another's creative journey, spy their wares and peek into their tool box.

[Lyndal Osborne](#)'s studio is a lot like a natural history museum. It is a treasure trove of curiosities from the natural world, crates spilling with seaweed, dried flowers, fruit skins, shells, skulls and birds nests and shelves chock-a-block with finds from decades of beach wanders and walk-about. My eyes dart from one thing to another. This is going to be fun.

Osborne is the recipient of many prestigious awards and has a career both successful and prolific. Her work has shown internationally in more than 360 exhibitions and is in more than 75 permanent collections, including the National Gallery of Canada.

Growing up in Newcastle, NSW, Australia, Osborne's penchant to collect started with beach-combing. Little did she know this interest would become integral to her printmaking in the early '70s, when she used organic materials to build the maquettes (small-scale models) that inspired her prints.

In the mid-'90s she started to create three-dimensional installation art, now her sole focus since retiring as a fine arts professor at the University of Alberta in 2004.

The printing press and lithography stone racks that once occupied her studio have been replaced with surfaces to paint and assemble the many small components for her large-scale, sculptural installations.

“Installation is basically working in a number of different media, putting it together and placing it in a venue but instead of just thinking about a two-dimensional piece on a wall, you are now thinking about the volume of the space,” Osborne says.

Wood display tables with assorted natural and industrial materials for “Tracing Tides: A Topographical Investigation” sit on the floor, ready to be packed and shipped to an exhibition in Gros Morne National Park, Newfoundland. Though spacious, the studio can not accommodate all 25 tables so Osborne must visualize how the work will come together and present itself.

The work explores themes, somewhat activist, and often close to home — the genetic modification of seeds and urbanization and the loss of Alberta agricultural land.

“When I retired, I realized that I only have a so much time on the planet; I want to make my work about the things I care about,” she says. “I’m not trying to preach in the work. I’m hoping the audience will see the questions I am asking and look into it for themselves.”

Osborne’s home, studio and storage building are nestled on five acres of land. Here, she grows many of her art materials, flowers and grasses, in a large garden.

In addition to natural materials, everything from plastic gun shells to Starbucks stir sticks, cupcakes and artificial teeth are collected and recycled into the work.

Osborne’s brilliance is her ability to envision these materials

another way, to transform or reinvent them, giving new meaning to the original object.

“It starts with playing with materials ... just letting your imagination go and having fun creating.”

I lay eyes on a dried banana peel and see, well, a dark brown, shrivelled peel. Osborne, however, sees a building block for something wondrous. She once collected roughly 8,000 banana skins for a piece ... with a little help from her university students.

“I’d come to class in the morning and they would be pinned up alongside the black board,” she chuckles.

One piece required 1,000s of grapefruit skins — “Every day you eat one grapefruit.” Another 410 abandoned bird’s nests.

“Shoalwan: River Through Fire, River Through Ice,” a gym-sized installation, uses umpteen objects including 7,000 recycled glass jars.

Where does one store 55 boxes stacked on six pallets?

After years of using friends’ garages, an airport hanger and a locker, Osborne erected a building for storage, a space she shares with artists John Freeman and his son Mark Freeman.

Osborne’s 1,000-square-foot portion of The Big Pixel is filled with colour-coded boxes on pallets, each recorded in an inventory date base.

Do you ever get rid of anything? Nope.

Even boxes of latex gloves (in the wrong size) were eventually used in a piece, “Experimental Extinction.”

“I love my studio,” she says. “Most of all the 14-foot high ceiling — that’s essential. It gives you a feeling of volume and space. The second thing I like is the south-facing windows. I like southern light and looking out of the windows and day dreaming.”

With windows on three sides and sky lights, the space is generously bathed in natural light.

“I have three tables covered with things I am playing with. Usually, I work on two pieces at once but at a certain point, one piece will just take off and fill your hours and I can’t wait to get up in the morning and to the studio,” she says.

“Sometimes, I will wake up in the middle of the night and work for an hour, then I’ll go back to bed.” Ah, the joys of a home studio.

At 71, Osborne shows no interest in slowing down. She has two shows out on exhibit, two new ones in the works and five shows on exhibit between now and October. Each show requires a considerable investment of time and energy to set-up and disassemble.

At the moment, the destruction of the oceans through climate change has her attention. She holds up a fragile papier mache and dried grass ball with delicate spines (nails, pins) and adornments (dyed Arctic cotton from the Dempster Highway) poking out like a sea urchin. It is sheer genius. She will make dozens of these in her wonderful studio, each an exquisite, original piece of art.

Check out [www.lyndalosborne.com](http://www.lyndalosborne.com) for explicit photos of many of her installations.

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