



Engaging the child within

Printmaker's whimsical images inspired by tree houses, shacks and other 'half-wild' spaces

BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM
PHOTOGRAPHY • DWIGHT STORRING

One winter's day, artist Michelle Purchase helped build a giant igloo in a friend's backyard in which to host a party.

She was the creator of illuminated paper houses that hung like jewels from trees along Kitchener streets for her art installation in a "NightShift" festival.

She enjoys watching young children build forts in the woods of Waterloo's Bechtel Park where she's a volunteer with an outdoor school that encourages them to

explore nature.

Forts, ice houses, tree houses, beach hideouts, shacks, fishing huts; all have the ability to take us outside our everyday world into a place of the imagination, she says.

Purchase, a Kitchener printmaker, a landscape architect, a post-secondary school educator and a dynamo in Waterloo Region's arts community, loves those "half-constructed and half-wild" spaces that connect people to nature.

It's the belief behind many of the arresting

prints in her studio at Globe Studios, the former Bonnie Stuart shoe factory at the intersection of Cedar Street and Whitney Place in Kitchener that is now a maze of artists' spaces.

On a wall of the crowded room, you'll see prints of tree houses perched high in tall trees; a house on stilts; a houseboat with trees growing out of its roof; trees with a cabin nestled in its branches; towering apartment buildings with branches sprouting out of the top windows.

FACING PAGE: "WE CAN ONLY GO UP FROM HERE" Medium: etching with chine-collé



Michelle Purchase examines the “bramble burrow” after it has been run through the press.



“CLIMB ABOARD”
Medium: lithograph on
Japanese paper, beeswax, map

There might be a two-storey house on a tree canopy; a ship’s crow’s nest in a tree rising from the deck of a boat; a floating house held aloft by tree canopies resembling balloons.

She keeps more of her prints at her 102-year-old home near Victoria Park that she shares with her husband, Dan McCormick, and five-year-old daughter, Violet.

Purchase likes seeing visitors’ smiles when they step into her busy studio, with its boxes full of floodlights for an outdoor art project, drawers containing a large collection of Japanese papers and her 24-inch-wide Praga etching press. Despite the studio’s “organized chaos,” their gaze is instantly drawn to those tree house prints, mostly done in black-and-white or sepia (reddish-brown) palettes; some with a pop of red colour.

“So many people find it whimsical and

they get a lot of joy,” Purchase says.

Printmaking – labour-intensive, unpredictable yet repetitive – is a good medium to capture the atmosphere of magical spaces such as forts, Purchase says.

“I feel this imagery inspires imagination and provokes people to think like a kid about spaces where they used to play or . . . escape from everyday lives. People have a connection to things they build with their own hands.”

Purchase, 45, is accustomed to building with her own hands. She’s a landscape architect with a master’s degree from the University of Guelph. She majored in geography for her bachelor’s degree from the University of Waterloo. Her minor was fine arts.

During her university years, she was an outdoor educator at the YMCA Camp Wanakita near Haliburton. Between degrees, she worked in the Yukon on

projects involving snow sampling and grizzly-bear tracking. She had solo art shows in Whitehorse in 1994.

Purchase worked as a landscape architect from 1998 to 2005. Among her projects, she identified vegetation between Kitchener and Guelph along Highway 7, documenting tree species and diversity and looking for unique environmental conditions. She looked at thousands of trees in a Toronto area subdivision to see if they should be kept in the development. She photographed the forts she found in trees on the edge of the subdivision, made by neighbourhood children who had scrounged construction Styrofoam, plywood and insulation sheets.

“They are very interesting because the way kids build is different from adults. They look crazy, nothing is level; there are no floors,” she says.

In 2004, Purchase began teaching part time in environmental studies at York University; then joined Niagara College at Niagara-on-the-Lake as a professor in the School of Environment and Horticulture from 2005 to 2015. She was a co-ordinator of its ecosystem restoration program.

This past fall, she taught a first-year graduate course at the University of Guelph’s School of Environmental Design and Rural Development.

Trees and art have always been part of Purchase’s soul. She grew up in a rural house in Niagara Region. It was surrounded by deciduous trees, and there was a large ravine behind the house.

“I grew up looking at all different varieties of oak. We even had black oak and tons of sassafras, lots of maple,” she says. They also had several cucumber trees, the only endangered trees in Canada at the time.

“That was huge,” she says. “When you’re a kid playing alone in the woods, you really develop a familiarity and comfort with nature that I don’t think kids in urban areas get.”

That’s one reason she volunteers at Wildflowers Forest School, run by educator Brandy Schell, where Purchase’s kinder-

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ABOVE: "MOBILE HOME"

Medium: lithograph on Japanese washi, topographic map of the Welland Canal, & beeswax on wood panel

RIGHT: "CROWS NEST"

Medium: etching with chine-collé



garten-aged daughter, Violet, is a student once a week. In the woods at Bechtel Park, children play in nature in all seasons. They count acorns, climb trees while learning balance and risk-taking, build forts, measure with weights, learn how to run a pulley with a bucket.

"I love it," Purchase says. "I just want her (Violet) to get as much variety of experiences as possible. I really feel that exposure to nature is important to everybody and I don't think people get enough."

Purchase has a quicksilver mind, boundless energy and an impressive work ethic.

She combines her printmaking studio, teaching, volunteering and parenthood while exploring a strong interest in the role of contemporary art in public spaces in a healthy community. She's on the region's public art advisory committee.

She's also president and board chair of the adventurous Contemporary Art Forum Kitchener and Area (CAFKA), which presents a free biennial exhibition of contemporary art in Waterloo Region's public spaces and offers opportunities for art education.

It's a demanding job at a non-profit, artist-run organization that relies on government grants, sponsorships and individual donations, but she is remarkable, executive director Gordon Hatt says.

"She's an incredibly quick study," says Hatt, a curator and sole employee of CAFKA, a professional organization that attracts artists from all over the world.

She's detail-oriented and able to see the big picture, he says. "Her mind never stops working. She's never bereft of ideas. If there's a task, she'll accomplish it."

He described the time when an artist pulled out at the last minute of an arrangement to use space at Kitchener Market on Saturday mornings. Hatt had barely mentioned the problem to Purchase when she already had a solution.

"She'd already devised a program and plan and said 'We are going to have so

much fun.'" Her CAFKA Family Days at the market were a success with children who made treasure maps and learned book-binding and calligraphy.

"She took a situation and turned it into a big plus," Hatt says.

Last year, Juanita Metzger asked Purchase to help her with an idea she had for prints based on textural photographs – macro photos of rocks, soil, tree limbs other natural surfaces – taken by her husband during their travels.

Metzger, of Kitchener, was inspired by a printmaker whose work they'd seen in Denmark. She wanted to surprise her husband by learning the technique to feature his photos. Purchase researched it and led Metzger through each step.

"I was completely overwhelmed with all the new things I learned," Metzger says.

"I've never done my own art, but I love the process of how artists create their work." The prints are beautiful.

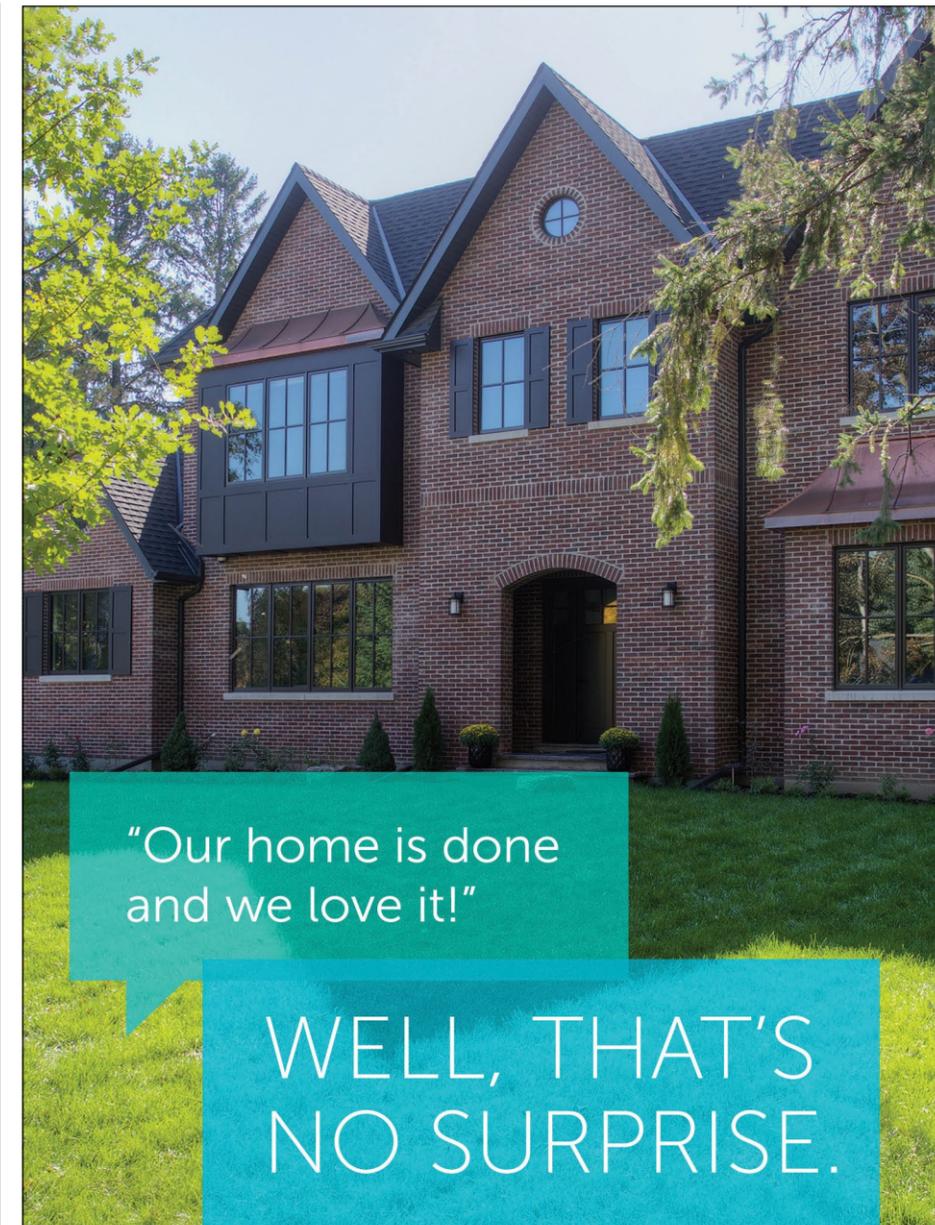
"She's an excellent guide for other people's creative process. What I also got out of it is an opportunity to work with another woman who is exceptional at her art and craft."

Purchase always wanted to be an artist. She knew she could draw; other students would crowd around her desk in elementary school when she put her imagination to work.

Her teacher parents, now retired, were concerned about an artist's future earning a living and urged her to find something "more job-oriented" to study at university. She applied to architecture school but was not accepted, so she took science in her first year. "I didn't love it," she says.

"I switched faculties four times after I flunked out of science. I had 90s in high school. It was a huge shock. It was awful. . . I ended up begging the dean of arts to let me in for a general arts program."

Later, while teaching college students, she understood even more about how important it is to choose studies about



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which you're passionate. Some of her best students in soil studies and vegetation analysis had English, history and philosophy backgrounds; not science.

"Over time, I noticed that it didn't matter what your undergrad degree was, it had more to do with enthusiasm, and the arts students did well. When you're excited, you go the extra mile. Exposure to a wide variety of disciplines, activities and interests is so important. Focusing too soon, too narrow is very detrimental."

As a university student, she loved cultural geography and environmental studies and she fit in as many fine arts courses as she could. Her grades in other subjects went up.

"I found that in terms that I didn't have fine art courses, I didn't do as well in my other courses," she says. "It had a very meditative effect and it helped me focus and calm my brain. You are physically engaged."

She learned again about the importance

of her art during her first couple of years working as a landscape architect. She had no time, space or resources to pursue her art and it made a difference, she says. "I was miserable."

She found an artistic home with two artists in Guelph with a printmaking studio. With their help, she began to work on monoprints, which she could finish in an evening. It's like doing a painting but on a plate, she says, and there's only one print in the end.

Guelph printmaker Tammy Ratcliff, who helped instruct Purchase then, says her friend has always been keenly interested in Japanese papers and new techniques.

"She is always investigating new ways of using washi and pushing herself," Ratcliff says. Washi is Japanese paper made by hand in the traditional manner.

"She dives in and immerses herself and comes out with amazing knowledge. She

has that type of inquiring mind and she follows through.

"Her work has definitely evolved; it's bigger and more challenging. And in the last couple of years she has allowed herself to think outside of printmaking, doing installations."

Purchase is as interested in technique as she is in the finished print.

She usually works on a copper plate, which creates a finer etch without highly toxic chemicals, she says. She etches the plate in a ferric chloride solution ("I would like a non-toxic art studio ideally"); covers the plate with a wax-based or other type of "resist"; and then scratches away the resist with a tool or scrap of matte board.

After the resist is removed, she inks the plate with a paste-like ink, rubbing the ink into the grooves and polishing the surface clear. She puts the plate on the press with

dampened paper over it, runs it through the press and the image is transferred. She uses other techniques as well.

That's the first "pass," she says. For the next print, she might darken the fort floor or blacken a window. The third time, she might use a tool to create texture. When she's finished with the plate, she might add some colour with a shape cut out of Japanese paper. The plate is inked, and dampened washi paper is laid on top. The little coloured piece of washi – perhaps a red house – is lightly pasted and placed over the heavier printmaking paper. When the plate is run through the press, the papers are joined together.

"This is very, very different from other printmaking techniques like screen print and block print," Purchase says. She also does plate lithography, which is traditionally done on limestone.

"There are hundreds of ways to create the

image you end up with," she says. "There's an element of surprise. Sometimes it's totally not what you expect and you work around unexpected results."

"The problem-solving is very similar to that of building a fort."

After finishing the fall term teaching at University of Guelph, Purchase is able to spend this winter focusing on her art. She's applying to shows. She already has an impressive curriculum vitae that shows a full page of solo and groups shows in which she has taken part since the early 1990s.

Her work has won awards and is in the Bank of Montreal's corporate collection in Toronto. As well, it's available for sale and rentals at the Art Gallery of Ontario, art galleries in Hamilton and Guelph, at Open Studio and at Canvas Gallery, both in Toronto.

"I think I'm at a fork in the road," Purchase says. Should she continue

teaching or concentrate solely on her art?

She wants to do more art installations in public spaces and is pondering a project that would involve both her printmaking skills and the actual construction of a tree fort into which people can climb.

It would be the first tree fort she'd made. Growing up, she built plenty of forts on the ground but her sister was the agile one who climbed trees, she says with a laugh.

"I'd like to do more sensory experiences, more immersive types of spaces people encounter that pull them out of their comfort zone," Purchase says.

"I love public art because it is a fair playing ground for people to view art."

"There's no admission, no pretensions of a gallery. It's not a foreign space. It's right here, open to everyone, regardless of income and social status, education or culture. It's an open, universally visible, accessible medium." 



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