

# Thinking outside the blue box

Vancouver artists find inspiration in the much-maligned 'binners' who scavenge Vancouver for bottles and cans, writes **ALEXANDRA GILL**

VANCOUVER

**O**n a grubby corner of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, a scruffy man in a tattered coat shuffles up to the front windows at Centre A gallery. "Holy crap!" he says, staring inside, where more than 3,000 empty glass bottles are neatly arranged on the concrete floor for a new exhibit called *Overflow*.

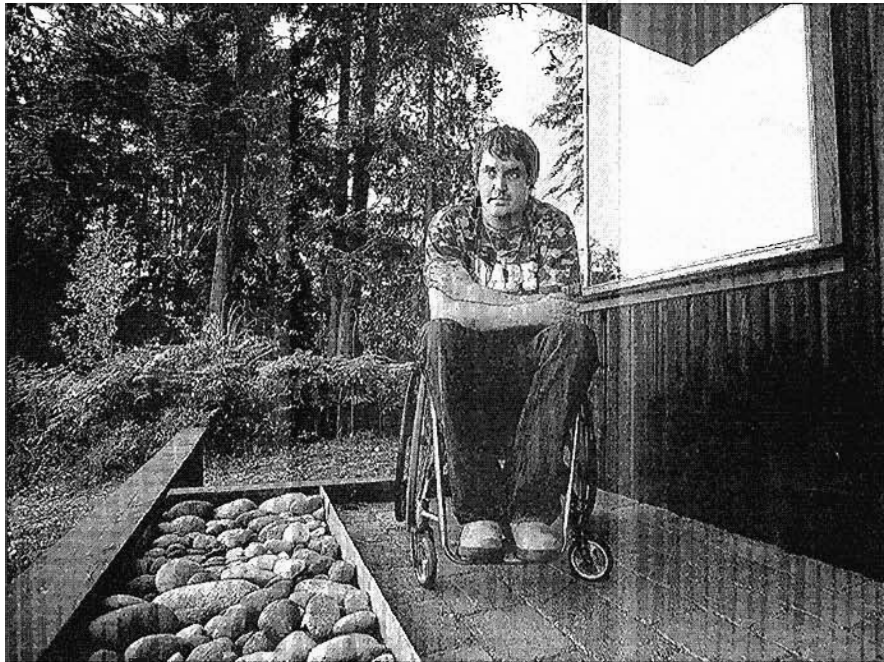
To the city's binners — a ragtag army of vagabond recyclers who eke out a living by scavenging dumpsters and blue boxes for returnable bottles, cans and scraps of metal — this work in progress (it opened last week) would appear to be the ultimate jackpot, at least at first glance. But, in fact, the gentleman on the sidewalk takes a closer look, shakes his head and wanders away. He has quickly surmised that the bottles are worthless.

And he's correct, at least from a binner's point of view. As explained in the exhibit brochure, the bottles (many chipped, some foreign, others oddly shaped) are mostly rejects from the local recycling depot, United We Can. If Koh hadn't claimed them, the depot would have had to pay a salvage company to haul them away for crushing.

This thought-provoking exhibit is just one of several local artistic projects inspired by the underground economy of the binners. Also known as dumpster divers and lane pickers, binners are a well-established presence in Greater Vancouver, where an estimated 1,500 workers ply the lowly trade.

As filmmaker Murray Siple explains in his upcoming NFB documentary, *Carts of Darkness*, binning is a lucrative industry; some binners claim they can earn up to \$200 a day. The local bottle bounty comes courtesy of the province's aggressive container-deposit legislation, which covers not just beer and wine bottles, but also pop cans and Terra Paks. The idea, in principle, is that levies of between five and 20 cents will motivate consumers to return their bottles and cans. In reality, many throw them in the garbage or the blue box.

A binner steps into the void, sifts through the mess, returns the empties and pockets the money. "The sound of bottles clanking in a shopping cart is the music of Vancouver," art critic Clint Burnham writes in Koh's exhibit catalogue.



RAEAL GEBRSZAK FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Alas, one man's music is another man's racket. Last month, Vancouver's engineering-services department asked city council to consider a bylaw amendment that would order businesses to put locks on commercial-waste containers to keep the binners out. Proponents of the measure say they are sick and tired of the noise and mess created by having so many people tramping through the alleys behind their homes and businesses at all hours.

Opponents counter that the idea of locking up dumpsters is an overly simplistic way to combat a complexity of underlying social ills caused by poverty, drug addiction, mental illness and homelessness. Nor, they argue, does the proposal address the real culprits: those who

put their recyclables in the garbage in the first place.

The recommendation has been put on hold, pending another report on alternative solutions. But considering that this was the second time in two years that the idea of locking dumpsters was raised, and mayor Sam Sullivan is now hell-bent on cleaning up the city by the 2010 Olympics, the issue isn't going away any time soon.

Enter the artists and their alternative perspectives. "It would be inhumane to deprive this segment of the population of their livelihood," says Koh, who points out that binners are widely supported by many who separate their bottles and leave them curbside for easy picking. "It's about absolving guilt," Koh suggests. "I've talked to so many privileged people who say they feel

good about putting their bottles out for binners." Over time, her flexible mass of glass bottles will grow and shift in shape, eventually spreading across the entire gallery.

The fact that the Centre A is located in the Downtown Eastside, a gentrified incursion into the city's worst poverty zone, makes Koh's show and the contradictions it raises that much more poignant. "While I was preparing for the exhibit and cleaning all these bottles I had collected, it almost felt like I was bringing an aspect of care to the neighbourhood," Koh explains.

Across Burrard Inlet, high in the mountains, on the tony streets of North and West Vancouver, filmmaker Siple paints a vastly different portrait of binning. A quadriplegic who was injured in a motor vehicle accident 10 years ago, Siple, 36, was initially interested in the subject because of the parallels between him and the binners he met at his local mall. "We're stereotypes to the passing customers: the drunk and disorderly bottle collectors; and me, wheelchair bound and precarious in my adapted vehicle. People ... think our lives must suck."

On the contrary, he argues. "Being a binner on the North Shore is idyllic in comparison to the Downtown Eastside," Siple explains. "They live outdoors in tents among

the trees ... and the bounty up here is so huge, it only takes two or three blocks in this neighbourhood to fill up a shopping cart."

Siple, a former snowboarder and mountain-sport film director, was even more intrigued when he discovered that bottle collectors in his neighbourhood had turned binning into an extreme sport of sorts, by racing their stolen shopping carts down the steep, windy roads of North Vancouver, reaching speeds of 65 km/h. "When I saw that, my heart started thumping," he says. "I hadn't experienced that kind of rush since I followed snowboarders down the mountain with my video camera."

But the further he delved into their world, the darker it became. Four of the 10 men he followed died during production, including one hit by a cargo van while pushing his shopping cart, and another who was hit over the head with a shovel in a fight over bottle turf.

Back in the Downtown Eastside, Michael Strutt is another artist who has created a pragmatic tool for binners, with the UBU, or urban binning unit, an alternative to stolen shopping carts. The lightweight cart, made from a steel frame fitted with a polyethylene plastic bag, was developed as a thesis project while Strutt was an industrial-design student at Emily Carr Institute. There are currently 10 UBUs on the street, and 40 more coming, thanks to new charitable grants.

The eight-month pilot project, says Strutt, was more successful than he had even hoped. "It looks good, it works well, the wheels run smoothly and it doesn't make noise. The feedback from the binners that use it has been really positive."

Adds Strutt, "I totally understand there are big problems with rubbish. I can understand that locking down binners might be thought to be cost-effective. But it doesn't address the laziness of people who don't filter out their recyclables. If this project could do one thing, I hope it helps people understand what's really going on out there."