

What do *Dreissena polymorpha* and modern art in Canada have in common? Plenty, according to British artist Simon Starling, winner of the 2005 Turner Prize. Sarah Stanners* reports.

MUSCLING IN ON CANADIAN ART

For Starling, *Dreissena polymorpha*, commonly known as zebra mussels, are the perfect analog for a certain modern art phenomenon in Canada. The foreign artist, the European species in particular, arrives on the shores of Canada and dominates the local art scene. A case-in-point is Henry Moore (1898-1986), one of Britain's leading twentieth-century sculptors.

On 2 April 2006, Starling sank a contemporary adaptation of Moore's bronze sculpture, *Warrior with Shield*, to the bottom of Lake Ontario in order to have it infested by zebra mussels. According to Moore, the amputated form of *Warrior with Shield* was inspired by the worn deformations of a stone found by the sea. Starling's project has reversed the sculpture's conception by tossing a recreation of Moore's Warrior back into the water. This incubated Warrior will eventually be hauled out of the lake and exhibited at Toronto's Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in February 2008.

Both scientists and artists are interested to know how the finished artwork will be displayed. One method under consideration involves using maggots to rid the sculpture of the mussel flesh, leaving the shells, which will then be sprayed with a fixative. A collage produced by Starling and titled *Proposal for Lake Ontario - Infestation Piece*

(*Warrior with Shield vs the Zebra Mussel*), provides an indication of how the finished artwork may appear.

Unlike most with an investment in Lake Ontario, Starling has done everything he can to encourage a zebra mussel infestation. For reasons that respect both copyright and biology, Starling's faux Moore sculpture is not made of bronze, but steel. The Henry Moore Foundation insists rightfully that no official copies be made of the artist's work beyond the editions that already exist. Since posthumous copies of Moore's sculptures are strictly forbidden, Starling's Warrior is slightly larger and made from a less precious material. Moreover, steel was used because zebra mussels are attracted to it and repelled by copper, which is a key component of bronze. In fact, boat hulls are often lined with copper-based, anti-fouling paint in order to eliminate zebra mussels. Expert help has also been given by Dr. Gerald Mackie, Professor at the University of Guelph's Department of Zoology. The worlds of art and science came together when Mackie and the Power Plant's Head of Installation, Paul Zingrone, went on a hunt for algae to act as an attractant in the preparation of Starling's mussel-bound sculpture. Occasional check-ups on the mock Warrior have revealed, contrary to popular belief, that zebra

mussels continue to grow at a healthy pace, even through the winter season in Canada.

Stowed away in ballast water, zebra mussels spread from the Caspian Sea to North American waters in 1988. They were first introduced to Lake St. Clair and colonized the Great Lakes shortly thereafter. Moore's art, like the mussels, arrived in Canada on transatlantic vessels. In 1955 the Art Gallery of Toronto, now known as the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), took the advice of Anthony Blunt and acquired the bronze *Warrior with Shield* from Moore. By the 1960s, Moore had made a major impression on Toronto. The feeling was apparently mutual. In 1974, the AGO opened the Henry Moore Sculpture Centre with a collection donated by the artist, including 101 sculptures, 57 drawings and a nearly-complete set of his prints, making it the largest collection of Moore's work outside of the Henry Moore Foundation in Much Hadham, England. Although the general public celebrated the opening of the Sculpture Centre, members of the Canadian Artists' Representation (CAR) saw the new centre as evidence of cultural imperialism and protested the AGO's apparent lack of investment in local artists. CAR suggested that the Henry Moore Sculpture Centre be renamed to honour Tom Thomson, a late Canadian artist. To this controversy, Moore

responded publicly, '...art is international.'

The way we understand art and the world under water is, for most of us who remain grounded, largely conceptual. Starling's art is both conceptual and rooted deeply in the material. By creating a curious spectacle involving Moore and mussels, we are inspired to consider the broader ideas behind its making. An increasing taste for the international in both art and trade has brought foreign artists and aquatic life to Canada. The carriage of zebra mussels via the import of goods to North America has created an unnatural imbalance in the variety and dominance of species in the Great Lakes. Does the international banner now held by most artists make regional art a thing of the past? Art can raise environmental awareness and, in this case, the environment can help bring cultural circumstances to mind.

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Note: Simon Starling's project is part of The Power Plant Commissioning Program and is projected to be on exhibition, along with other works by the artist, in February 2008. Visit www.thepowerplant.org for more information.

