

**Bellevue Art Museum**  
 Blooms with FRESH FLOWERS  
 January 30 - April 11

From flowers presents seventeen contemporary artists who explore beauty, and spirit, and meaning through flowers and floral imagery.

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## Features

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### Brushes with the border

BY KRISTIAN F. KOFOED

Seeing into the minds and hearts of Canadian artists.

*Curator as subject: Presentation House reveals museums through their own eyes.*

**Vancouver's charms** include exotic cuisine, spectacular natural beauty, and cosmopolitan streets. Less well-known is its exciting art scene, currently well-represented by two Jack Shadbolt shows and Presentation House's thoughtful photography exhibit.

Jack Shadbolt, a major Canadian artist, died last November. His long career was distinguished by a passionate imagination and restless experimentation with different art forms. As a young man, captivated by social realism and the populist murals of Diego Rivera, he sketched the lives of the working class in the narrow streets of 1930s Victoria and Vancouver. "Heart of Darkness," at Or Gallery, features Shadbolt's work from the 1940s and '50s. The bleakness of wartime, including his job cataloging photographs of concentration camp victims, may have inspired these disturbing drawings of an imagined invasion of Vancouver. Corpses lie in doorways and dismembered body parts are scattered around the well-kept streets.

#### Vancouver Art Gallery

*Jack Shadbolt retrospective*  
 750 Hornby, 604-662-4700  
 ends May 2

#### Or Gallery

*Emily Carr/Jack Shadbolt, "Heart of Darkness"*  
 112 W Hastings, 604-683-7395  
 ends February 27

#### Presentation House Gallery

*"Camera Obscured"*  
 333 N Chesterfield, 604-986-1351  
 ends February 21

After the war, Shadbolt embraced abstract expressionism so energetically he seemed to have split the atom with his paintbrush. *Festival of Worms II* is like a paint bomb in a pasta factory—every imaginable noodle shape, from macaroni to manicotti, struggles up from the blackened earth. It's a frenzied dance of life under an ochre sky, crowned with a pyramid exploding with earthworms. Shadbolt's

paintings express his belief in a dark force at the heart of nature and humanity, a force also containing the seeds of regeneration and new life. Decay, even death, were part of the process of change.

Or Gallery is on Hastings, a squalid, sometimes rough street that emanates with the same vigor and decay as Shadbolt's work. Outreach efforts by the University of British Columbia ("Heart of Darkness" was co-curated by Scott Watson of UBC's Belkin Gallery) seem to be revitalizing the area. With artists moving in, and coffeehouses and galleries opening, Hastings may yet become Vancouver's Belltown.

Only a few blocks from Or Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery occupies another world of posh shoe shops, sushi bars, and luxury hotels. The VAG's memorial retrospective shows Shadbolt's lyrical side. *Medieval Town*, a 1957 abstraction, is a townscape, incorporating figurative roofs, doors, and windows. Warm oranges and pinks dominate the foreground, and a blood-red vein snakes through the center, fading to a twilight blue.

Shadbolt's later work focuses on environmental degradation, and *The Place* has both polemical force and painterly grace. A native mask, half-covered in mud and mulch, stares up from the forest floor at stripped trees and a barren winter sky. For all the stillness of the scene, the painting vibrates with a livid energy.

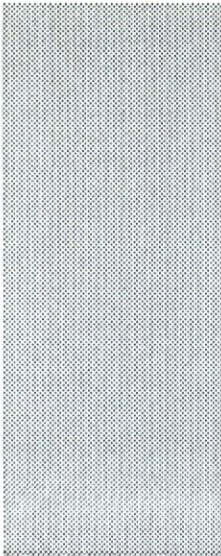
**There's a strong contrast** between Shadbolt's passionate work and the cerebral pleasures of "Camera Obscured" at Presentation House. Vid Ingelevics, the exhibit's curator, selected 89 photographs from millions buried in the archives of such museums as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Louvre, and the American Museum of Natural History. It's a look at the museum through its own eyes; staff photographers took these pictures for internal purposes, not for the public.

Museums, which originated from house collections of curious objects, still have an aspect of theatricality about them. Ingelevics found freak-show images in the archives, including legions of animal skeletons led by a skinless and penisless man; a museum guard sleeping under a dinosaur; and the King of Sweden with his favorite dwarf.

The photograph of visitors waiting reverently, like pilgrims at Lourdes, to be admitted to the new Field Museum in Chicago suggests the strength of our belief that museums present value-free, objective information. Our critical judgment is suspended, as if we were in the Land of Oz, watching beautiful and fascinating objects float, unanchored, outside the real world. As in Oz, we are encouraged to "pay no attention to the man behind the curtain."

Ingelevics pulls the curtain back to show how the drama of the museum is carefully constructed. Each part of a museum—buildings, internal organization, and the arrangement and display of the collection—is as painstakingly staged as any professional production. As buildings, museums become elegant backdrops. For the ladies who lunch—shown dining at the Art Institute of Chicago, dressed to the nines—museums are places to be seen as well as to see.

In this ongoing drama, museum collections are the props. "Camera Obscured" shows fascinating aspects of how collections are constructed and displayed. You watch everything from dioramas being



created--an art in itself--to the grisly process of stuffing and mounting birds for display.

A sense of the internal pecking order is given by the photograph of a curator (pictured here), dressed neatly in a dark suit as he installs a diorama of a giant millipede for the Hall of Forests. Look closely, and you'll see the rough, anonymous hands supporting the platform on which he does his delicate work. Museums are treasure chests of history, art, and science, but they're created and sustained by human beings with their own agendas and attitudes. In the picture of a museum artist painting in the final details on a neolithic sun-worship figure, the giant savage is naked and vulnerable; the artist wears a white lab coat and a supercilious, somewhat arrogant expression. Before the curtains part and the lights go up, the museum readies humanity for its close-up.

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