

Rusting beauty



By Nate Smelle

BEFORE THE OFFICIAL opening of artist Don Wilson's exhibit *Aesthetic Fabrications: Photographs of an Industrial Geography* I had a chance to walk around the space by myself to take a really good look at the images on the walls. Entering the gallery I could see right away that this exhibit was unlike any other I had seen in Bancroft before. Scanning the photographs lining the perimeter of the room, it was the coldness of the concrete and steel in each of the photos that first caught my eye. Stopping to absorb each piece on its own, it didn't take long to realize the great depth of care and thought behind each moment Wilson has preserved in this collection.

Every image highlights a history of usefulness, while forcing the observer to question what it means to be useful. Wilson's use of light and shadows and the arrangement of the photographs on the walls of the gallery lead you along as if you were strolling through the sparse industrial landscape, hunting for beauty on a warm sunny day.

For me they conjured up memories from the two years I spent driving a cube van back and forth between any-town New York and any-town Ontario. Often while waiting to unload whatever goods I was carrying, I would spend time wandering around the factories with my camera in search of the rare moments of beauty that hide in such depressing destinations. Sometimes I would find them in the reflection of a puddle of oily sludge, other times on a rusting machine or a pile of metal shavings. I remember once finding an elaborate piece of art painted on a bathroom wall?likely not over one visit to the washroom?at a factory in Brampton. In multiple colours, one of the workers had drawn the image of a monkey behind bars with a rainbow coloured afro. Above it were scratched the words ?This place will funk up a good human being.?Never easy to find such a treasure, however, when they turned up they were always the best part of my day.

When I saw this exhibit for the first time I had no idea that it was a collection of photographs of the GP Flakeboard Plant in Bird's Creek. When I found out from the artist that this show focused on this local landmark, I had to walk around the room again take another good look. This time around I was even more impressed. It is amazing how many uniquely striking moments Wilson was able to find in this one empty place. Looking deeply into these photos and studying every concrete block, every crack in the asphalt, every rusting machine and material, it is obvious that there are a lot of really useful materials exposed to the elements rusting and rotting away.

Thinking about utility in light of Wilson's photos I have to wonder if such a photogenic resource might have a greater earning potential than being sold just as scrap metal. Could this facility be used to collect, re-process and re-purpose our own recyclable wastes that are filling up our landfills. Thinking of the state of the distillery district and Brickworks in Toronto before they were re-constructed, there is hope for this lonely, aging structure.