



THE  
BLUE  
CABIN



The Blue Cabin Exhibition  
by Jeremy Borsos and Sus Borsos

grunt gallery  
116 - 350 E 2nd Ave  
Vancouver, BC  
V5T 4R8  
June 15 – July 28, 2018

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The Blue Cabin project is led by grunt gallery, along with Other Sights for Artists Projects, and Creative Cultural Collaborations (C3).

## THE BLUE CABIN SPEAKER SERIES

Wednesday, June 20 at 7:00 p.m.

### ARTIST TALK WITH JEREMY BORSOS

Artist Jeremy Borsos will give a talk describing the restoration of the small 1920's building known as the Blue Cabin. The talk will focus on possible translations of the cabin's history.

Thursday, June 28 at 7:00 p.m.

### DANIEL FRANCIS | SQUAT CITY: A BRIEF HISTORY OF SQUATTING AROUND BURRARD INLET

Author and historian Daniel Francis will speak about the history of squatter villages on the region's foreshore.

Saturday, July 7 at 2:00 p.m.

### CAROLE IITER IN CONVERSATION WITH KRISTA LOMAX

Artist Carole Itter will present an informal talk about her artwork and writings during her 35-year-long residency at the Blue Cabin. She will be joined by artist and editor Krista Lomax.

Thursday, July 12 at 7:00 p.m.

### OTHER SIGHTS FOR ARTISTS' PROJECTS, THE FORESHORE

Artist Jen Weih and curator and artist Vanessa Kwan will speak about The Foreshore, a project produced by Other Sights, in collaboration with Kimberly Phillips.

Thursday, July 19 at 7:00 p.m.

### THE BLUE CABIN PROJECT

Blue Cabin founding partners Glenn Alteen, Esther Rausenberg, and Barbara Cole will discuss the Blue Cabin Floating Artist Residency project.



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## THE BLUE CABIN EXHIBITION



GLENN ALTEEN

When the Blue Cabin Committee first approached Jeremy and Sus Borsos to talk about the remediation of the cabin, our interest was in their expertise as builders working with recycled and heritage materials. We were looking for advice only, but once we got on site with the cabin at the Canexus Plant in North Vancouver it was easy to see they were smitten with the project and with the cabin. So it wasn't a complete surprise that they wrote us soon after, expressing interest in completing the remediation themselves. They had read Hal Kalman's Conservation Report and Andrew Todd's Remediation Plan and were confident they were up for the task.

That was truly an understatement. Their extraordinary work on the cabin was extensive and complete. Part remediation and part archaeological dig, each week brought new insights into the history of the Cabin before Al and Carole's time there, piecing together a timeline around renovations and previous tenants. It told us not only about the human inhabitants, but also about the mice, the wasps and the carpenter ants that found a home there. The Borsos' were able to cobble together a history from bits of newspaper hidden in the walls that provided dates and interests (labour newspapers etc.) of the inhabitants that had lived there.

Finally, when Jeremy and Sus took up the floor, they found almost 40 posters from 1927 advertising a host of theatre, music, film, boxing matches and vaudeville events, and the venues, giving us a time capsule of the cultural landscape the cabin was born into.

These details got revealed bit by bit through the six months of the remediation. Each detail preserved and retold by the Borsos' added to our knowledge base, and every detail was documented extensively by photographs. This process moved hand in hand with the remediation that in the end saw the cabin completely taken apart and rebuilt, inside and out. The interior has been left as it was except for the removal of two small walls. It now wears its history on its face. Under Carole Itter's direction, the Borsos' recreated the exterior painting in the exact colour that gave the cabin its name.

On behalf of the Blue Cabin Committee and grunt I would like to thank Jeremy and Sus for their amazing contribution to this project and for this exhibition. I would like to also thank Scott Watson for his written contribution. I would like to also acknowledge and thank the Blue Cabin Committee as well as the professionals and funders who have believed in this project and worked so hard to bring it into being.



## BLUE CABIN



SCOTT WATSON

Due to a heroic effort led by arts activists Glenn Alteen, Esther Rausenberg, Barbara Cole and their friends, the cabin squatted by Al Neil since the 1960s was saved. Al had lived in the cabin for several years after moving in in 1966 and in recent decades he and his partner Carole Itter used the cabin as a studio/retreat. Al and Carole often received visitors there, where they had made an enchanted bricolage universe in the house, on the house and in the surrounding woods. Both artists observed and researched Burrard Inlet with some intensity. Itter made several bodies of work based on the Inlet, including works about the Canada geese she befriended, even appearing as a goose when she accepted the Audain prize for lifetime achievement in 2017. She also has made installations, videos and performances that celebrate the life of the Inlet and warn of the peril brought by its ever-increasing industrialization. Neil, besides making collages, music and assemblages, also collected (as an art work) all the press about the Inlet from the '70s to the present as kind of a forensic file on the Inlet's degradation by industry.

The intertidal zones of Burrard Inlet, False Creek and the banks of the lower Fraser—the traditional and unceded territory of the Squamish, Musqueam and Tseil-Waututh since time immemorial—hosted numerous squatters and squatter communities for much of the twentieth century. Mostly these housed people who worked in shore industries, but also—famously—artists. There is enduring fascination with the Dollarton Mudflats squats. This small community of five households is celebrated in two films, and represented in the work of Tom Burrows, Ian Wallace and others. Malcolm Lowry and Margerie Bonner lived in a squat at the site of present day Cates Park in the '40s, not so far from where the Blue Cabin was sited from around 1933 to 2015.<sup>1</sup> Storied by writers and artists, the squats occupy a place in our imagination of the city. If they once stood for a certain kind of do-it-yourself living off the grid, living outside zoning regulations and living in houses that weren't really "property," the memory of them serves as a reminder of how enslaved to real estate Vancouver and its citizens have become. The Blue Cabin, as it has come to be called, was the last squat on Burrard Inlet.<sup>2</sup> It survived, ironically, because it is in the shadow of private property. It

was adjacent to the McKenzie Barge & Derrick Company. The company allowed Neil and the people who lived in it before Al's tenancy to use it because they felt it made the property more secure to have someone there. But when McKenzie sold their land, the cabin was doomed and Neil and Itter were evicted in 2015.

Between then and now, the cabin was rescued, moved and "restored," and awaits a future as a place for an artist residency. The work of restoration was carried out by Jeremy and Sus Borsos, who worked on the cabin for five months. How suitable that they, like Neil and Itter, are bricoleurs. How fitting too, that they had done work on Liz Magor's aluminum, reduced-scale replica of an old Coal Harbour shack as a public art work. What the Borsos' performed is considerably more than what is usually meant by "restoration." They took the cabin apart, board by board, investigating its layers and history, sifting through what was found there, compiling an archive of some 4000 photographs and a collection of things ranging from newspapers and screws to mud wasp nests and mouse nests that are treated as the specimens of an archaeological dig that takes account not just of the house's human inhabitants, but some animal ones as well.

The building turned out to be eloquent in unexpected ways. Borsos points out how very unusual it is to preserve a structure that is so humble, that while its "aura" comes from long use by artists and its place in a constellation of artists' squats, it bears also the trace of its builder and of the inhabitants before Neil and Itter. The wall frame of the cabin was constructed using diagonal braces, a kind of throwback to pre-industrial methods of building, identifying the builder/designer as northern European. Neil had recalled that someone from McKenzie Barge had told him that the cabin had been built in Coal Harbour by a "Norwegian" and later moved across the inlet. Presumably, the Norwegian worked for the barge company. A torn page from *The Labour Statesman*, the paper of the Vancouver Trade and Labour Council, dated November 1937, was found in a keyhole, stuffed there during the cold winter of 1937/38. The cabin has unusual features for a modest utilitarian structure: The roof of the cabin is bowed in a shallow

bell curve, involving carpentry and design that went beyond what was simple and necessary. Some 70+ pieces of cut wood that echo or refer to this curve decorate the exterior of the cabin, forming the scalloped trim that frames the external sides, the shapes around the windows and the internal wall where it meets the bowed ceiling. The glass in the windows is older than the cabin and is rippled through age. Jeremy Borsos imagines that the care taken to decorate was for love, that the Norwegian expected to be joined by a partner. But, of course we don't know this. If this ornamentation is a known style from some, perhaps Norwegian town, we have not found that out, although the look of the cabin resembles other boathouses of the period. The style could be the invention of the builder, which may have no meaning at all, or it may represent an occult system of some sort. Or, more prosaically, the scalloping around the windows could represent the circular windows we associate with ships, giving the cabin a nautical theme.

There's evidence that a family lived in the house in the 1950s and did some minor renovations like adding a shower.<sup>3</sup> One the most striking finds of the restoration/archaeological process was the discovery of a cache of movie, event and vaudeville posters from 1927, dating the construction of the floor and perhaps of the whole cabin to not before that year. The posters were used to prevent the floorboards from squeaking, a common practice of the period.

Al added a window to the side facing the inlet and he and Carole painted three sides of the cabin the gradated blue to green that ended up giving the cabin its name.

Besides being a simple structure that speaks to us of our proletarian heritage, and besides being kind of a moral object in telling us that the way we house ourselves is a kind of unfreedom, the house is an archive, an archaeological site and a work of art. I'm sure that the Borsos' had all this in mind when they remediated the cabin.

It is work of art authored firstly by the Norwegian, whose ornamentation and bowed roof gives the Blue Cabin its weird charm. Secondly, Neil

and lter painted the cabin, and thirdly the remediation by Jeremy and Sus—almost fetishistic in its devotion to every surface and trace—made the cabin a kind of palimpsestic novel that bore witness not just to its inhabitants, but also to the decades through which it has lived on the north shore of Burrard Inlet, straddling the high tide line. The cabin, now most emphatically, contains the trace and aura of their work. The Borsos team approached the remediation as a work of performance art, evidenced by their preservation and presentation of their activity loge as a work of art, to say nothing of producing a photographic record of everything they did. Finally, Borsos has constructed a dazzling diorama/peep show model of the cabin as it once was on the shoreline. The housing for the diorama is fitted with shelves that display bits and pieces from the process. These things, utterly without monetary worth now, have the status of relics or museum specimens. There is something subversive and heart-warming about this transformation and inversion of values, this monumental effort to document and save something so non-monumental.

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<sup>1</sup> These sites are about a kilometer or more apart but are often conflated, most notoriously in Ken Lum's miniaturization of the houses of Lowry, Burrows and Spong, which were commissioned for the Vancouver Art Gallery's Shangra-La Hotel site and are now installed at the Dollarton mudflats as a placemaker for what the municipality destroyed in the early 1970s.

<sup>2</sup> Although it certainly belongs in the narrative and mythology of squats, the Blue Cabin was occupied with the consent of Westbridge Barge, who hooked it up to electricity for its tenant, Al Neil.

<sup>3</sup> Al Neil recalls finding women's shoes and photographs that indicated a family had lived there.







#### ARTISTS' BIOS

Jeremy Borsos lives and works on Mayne Island, British Columbia and in Athens, Greece. He worked in the motion picture industry in numerous capacities before enrolling at Emily Carr School of Art in Vancouver in 1983. He then relocated to New York, where he attended the Art Students League to study classical media. He returned to Canada in 1987, and has since exhibited his work regionally, nationally and internationally. Jeremy's multidisciplinary practice includes architecture, writing, photography, installation, painting, and video. Together, he and his wife Sus have developed a meta-historical use of salvaged architecture, constructing multiple dwellings and ancillary structures in both Canada and Europe.

Sus Borsos was born in Denmark. After studying statistics and computer sciences at Copenhagen University, she worked managing Scandinavian Stage Design, where she oversaw the creation of stages for major events in Europe in the 1980s and early '90s. Sus moved to Canada in 1992, and worked with Jeremy to build their home, which was created from salvaged architectural fragments. She went on to work as an electrician's assistant, and then in carpentry, before beginning construction with Jeremy on their second and third houses, also created with period architectural salvage. Sus has also worked in digital film editing and design, as well as with image output for reproduction. She has recently completed work with Jeremy on the remediation of the Blue Cabin, which will function as the studio component of a floating artist's residency. Current projects include the redesign and rebuild of a studio and living space in Athens, Greece.

#### WRITER'S BIO

Scott Watson is Director of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery and Professor in the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory at the University of British Columbia. A curator whose career has spanned more than forty years, Watson is internationally recognized for his research and work in curatorial and exhibition studies, contemporary art and issues, and art theory and criticism for which he has received several awards.

Watson has published extensively in the areas of contemporary Canadian and international art. Recent publications include *Tom Burrows* (2018); *Letters: Michael Morris and Concrete Poetry* (2015); *Thrown: British Columbia's Apprentices of Bernard Leach and their Contemporaries* (2011), a finalist for the 2012 Roderick Haig-Brown Regional Prize; "Race, Wilderness, Territory and the Origins of the Modern Canadian Landscape" and "Disfigured Nature" (*in Beyond Wilderness*, McGill University Press, 2007); and "Transmission Difficulties: Vancouver Painting in the 1960s" (*in Paint*, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2006).





