



By Murray Whyte

Visual arts



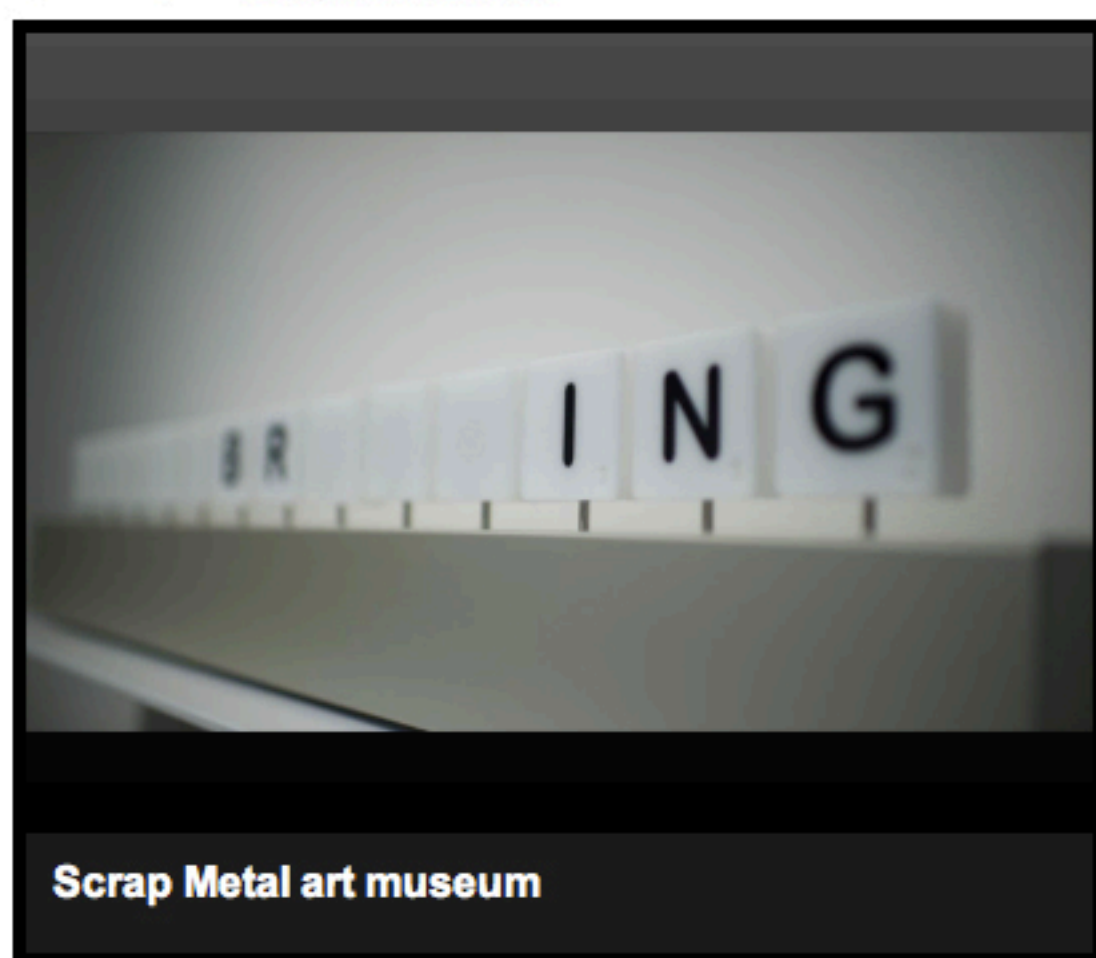
Toronto couple opens their own museum



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**Scrap Metal art museum**

Samara Walbohm arrives with a steel-grey knit toque pulled low over her eyes, clutching a bowl of picked-over oatmeal. It's the week of the opening of Scrap Metal, the new gallery/art foundation/private museum ("We're still not quite sure what to call it," she says) that she and husband Joe Shlesinger have started in a squat cinder block building near Bloor and Lansdowne, and anything that saves a minute or two, like breakfast on the run, helps.

Walbohm, who is tall and slim with a quiet intensity, surveys the expanses of white wall surrounding her. Months of labour and thought — and maybe a little anxiety — have come down to this, the inaugural exhibition of, as she puts it, "mine and Joe's stuff." The show is a selection of works from their personal collection called "Read All Over," a nod to the large representation of works here that use text, newsprint or books as their raw material: apt, given Walbohm's background as a literature PhD and the co-owner of Type Books, a pair of artfully assembled book stores in Trinity Bellwoods and Forest Hill Village.

"It looks good, right?" she asks, part question, part declaration. She's a little worried, but not too much. Putting your personal tastes on public display can be harrowing — "Joe says 'who cares what people think,' but you do, a little," she says — but Scrap Metal is no vanity project. Here, Walbohm, 40, and Shlesinger, 50, managing partner at the investment firm Callisto Capital, have assembled what they describe as a level playing field: big-name international artists like the French Annette Messenger and American John Latham alongside a clutch of Canadian and Toronto artists with less marquee value but, they believe, no less chops.

Messenger takes pride of place at the entrance with her creepily plush *Ciineemaa*, the word rendered from dismembered portions of various stuffed animals. Right beside it is a computer matrix painting by Vancouver writer and artist Douglas Coupland, a pair of works by Toronto artist Derek Sullivan and a dense grid of typewriter works by local favourite Ken Nicol, the naughtiness of which precludes me from offering the title here (for the faint at heart planning to drop by the gallery Friday, when it opens to the public: the F-word is a prevalent feature, almost neutered in its being repeated thousands of times).

Really, though, your introduction to Scrap Metal happens outside the door, with a blue and white sign glowing from the end of an alleyway strewn with scraps of light-industrial junk. "If this sign is on, the gallery is open," it instructs, but then qualifies. "If this sign is on, the gallery is closed but we forgot to turn the sign off." Two more qualifications later, you'll have no idea what open and closed even mean.

It is, of course, an artwork that helps capture Scrap Metal's serious-but-not-too-serious mission. It's by Micah Lexier, something of a local legend, and a signpost for Scrap Metal's intentions. Walbohm calls Lexier "a local artist everyone in the world should know," and the gallery is her best attempt to make good on such proclamations.

Local content is important to Scrap Metal. "I told Micah and Ken I didn't want to open without them," Walbohm says. She and Shlesinger are regulars on the international art fair circuit, travelling to events like Frieze in London or Art Basel Miami, massive events which agglomerate many millions of dollars worth of art buying under one roof: a very exclusive kind of one-stop shopping. They were struck recently by a couple of things.

"We found it really grating how commercially branded art has gotten," she says. "Also, you almost never see young Canadian artists. We really think our artists can be seen on the same level as any artist anywhere, so we thought, wouldn't it be interesting, given our collection, to start showing everybody all together?"

Scrap Metal began with a practical goal. "We were at our house asking 'Where is the collection going? Is it even a collection at all?'" says Walbohm, who describes her and her husband's art collecting as "very spontaneous; we're all over the map." But it quickly became something else.

"Really, we wanted to be a place where Canadian artists, and younger Canadian artists, could show their work," says Walbohm, outside the pressures of the commercial gallery system, and the bureaucracies of the museum world. "We want to be a bit of a bridge," Walbohm says. "I'd love some curator from London or Paris to come in and see some of these artists and say, 'Hey, I can show this work.' So we hope we can help them spread their wings a little bit."

The pair are opening their doors to guest curators, exhibitions and collections in a brisk, no-nonsense manner. "You only have to impress two people, Joe and me," Walbohm laughs. "The main thing for us is that it's not commercial: it's collaborative, organic, community-based and, hopefully, different."

She pauses for a look around at the very nearly finished show that surrounds her. A pair of glossy, imposing Graham Gillmore text paintings frame a corner of the space, interspersed with delicate paper works by Sarah McKillop and Lois Andison's wry, affecting "Heartbreaking" pieces.

"And really, everything looks a lot better in here than in my house," she says, letting loose a little squeal of joy. "It's incredible."

Scrap Metal opens to the public Friday at noon, 11 Dublin Street, Unit E, 416-588-2442.