

Lawson's climb

Artist Aubrey Reeves shares the story of a historic act that saved the lives of eight crew members of the Lord Ashburton in 1857. Filming in Grand Manan, she develops innovative ways to tell the tale.

Candice Mac Lean. Telegraph-Journal. Saint John, N.B.: Sep 5, 2009. pg. G.1

A rope ladder dangles from the abandoned shell of a lobster pound on the muddy shores of Grand Manan Island.

Here, artist Aubrey Reeves will recreate a heroic climb made by a man whose story first struck her seven years ago while working as a guide aboard an island whale-watching schooner.

"I got the job right before I went away for grad school and it was really amazing," says the 29-year-old Torontonion, who shared the tale almost daily with tourists.

"We tended to tell the story in that time period where you're heading out to where the whales were. I got into this telling and retelling of this story. It stuck with me."

James Lawson, she begins, was a Danish sailor in his 20s aboard the cargo ship Lord Ashburton, bound for Saint John from Toulon, France.

Weighing 1,009 tons and built at Brandy Cove, St. Andrews, for two days the Ashburton struggled against hurricane-force winds before a turbulent sea cast it against the weathered face of Grand Manan.

In the first hours of Jan. 19, 1857, the icy Bay of Fundy swallowed 21 crew members. Eight others it spit onto the island's north shore - now called Ashburton Head.

"James Lawson was one that washed up on shore," says Reeves.

After the crash, Lawson, wet and cold, peered up from the rocky shore at a 300-foot cliff, the black night sky masking the struggle ahead. In pursuit of survival, Lawson began the perilous climb.

"It probably would have taken a couple of hours because it's a really sheer cliff," says Reeves, a tall, slender woman who grew up outside of Saint John in Quispamsis.

Lawson reached the top after the steep climb, barely conscious and unable to feel his toes, which he would later lose to frostbite, she says. It is believed that as he clung to the cliff, the same winds that lay his ship to waste secured Lawson against the rock wall, saving him from a swift fall to death.

At the top, Lawson stumbled to a barn and collapsed.

"An islander found him into the early morning," says Reeves.

"He told him, 'There are seven other men at the base of that cliff.' "

The sailors were rescued and all eight men were sent to Saint John for treatment.

"After Lawson was released from the hospital he decided to come back to Grand Manan and settle his life here because he was so touched by the kindness of the locals," Reeves says.

Lawson learned English, eventually married, had children and became the island cobbler - a career Reeves found fitting for the man whose story she had gotten to know so well.

"I imagine he became a cobbler partly because his shoes wouldn't fit anymore so he had to make his own," Reeves says. "Also, sailors knew how to do a lot of sewing and he probably knew how to work with some leather and rope."

Lawson built a house on one of the island's main streets and lived there with his family until he died in 1918. He was 84.

Reeves left Grand Manan after her summer on the whale-watching schooner, but Lawson's story stayed with her. She knew she had to return to the island to explore it.

When she received a research creation grant from The Canada Council for the Arts earlier this year, Reeves moved to Grand Manan for two months to prepare a video installation about Lawson's survival story. Installation art uses three-dimensional works to alter a viewer's perception of a space. It incorporates video, sound and performance, and is usually designed for a specific space.

"The first couple of weeks I did interviews with people and after awhile it was like nobody really knew any more beyond this classic story everybody keeps telling," Reeves says, sipping tea at her studio desk. "I came here thinking this was a history I was investigating, but this story happened in 1857 and so there's nobody who still really has the memory."

The story started to move from being a history into a mythology when a local resident directed Reeves toward the work of Joseph Campbell, an American mythologist who created a story arc for all mythologies. Reeves found it applied to Lawson's tale.

"It started to be really useful when thinking of how to structure this piece. "

The arc follows distinct experiences in a character's life: a primary test, an ultimate test, a reward or return and a call to adventure. It is also divided into two worlds: the normal world and the other world.

Reeves connected the tidal cycle to these worlds by linking the normal world with high tide, the other world with low tide.

"When the tide is out, the ocean floor is revealed and it's this strange other world," she explains.

As her project came to life, Reeves knew she could only understand Lawson's struggle if she experienced it herself. She quickly became a lone actor in her videos, filming herself as she uncovered ways to represent Lawson's story.

"I really believe in process and that going through actions will reveal something to you and generally they also create interesting imagery," she says.

"Going over the acts over and over and over again brings you to a point of understanding it and you start to know what that gesture means and it's beyond an intellectual knowing; it's a physical knowing."

It's a practice Reeves has employed before.

In her last installation, *Dagbok*, Reeves recreated the diary of a Norwegian journalist who wrote while captive in a Nazi prison. The piece premiered in Kassel, Germany, in 2006, and was also exhibited in Toronto and Halifax.

Without access to a pen and paper, the prisoner wrote by pricking holes in coarse lavatory paper with a tack he had removed from a black-out curtain for the window in his cell.

Reeves mimicked the action by punching thousands of tiny pinholes in large paper screens, spelling out excerpts of the diary. As dark and light video passed through the pinpricked screen, different passages would appear while others vanished.

"It was really valuable to go through that like he did to replicate that action," she says of the six-month process. "That's what I've been thinking a lot here."

In an effort to mirror Lawson's actions, Reeves laid on the shore to learn how it feels to be washed up and climbed the rope ladder she tied to the shell of an old lobster pound to simulate Lawson's ultimate test.

"I'm here on my own. I don't have a crew, I don't have actors and I couldn't film it as a documentary because there's nobody to talk to who has any lived experience of it. I couldn't approach it like any kind of drama either because I have nobody to do it. So a way for me to work through ideas is to do them myself. Since I am here on my own, I can set up the camera and I can do it."

Reeves also made a pair of shoes from scratch, a task she describes as ambitious.

"Those are all my prototypes," she says, pointing to about three pairs of paper shoes along the wall of her studio.

"It was kind of hard and they're not too comfortable. I researched shoemaking, which is a completely dead art. Nobody knows how to do it anymore. It's incredible and really sad because it's a beautiful art form."

While Reeves filmed the stitching process, she remains undecided on its place in the final installation.

"I kind of like them as sculptural objects so they may end up going into the piece as objects and not as video " but then I might use parts of the video as well."

To represent the thought process behind Lawson's decision to settle on the island, Reeves built a stone labyrinth on the beach and walked its course over and over again. She filmed this exercise and, as the tide rolled in, it eventually engulfed the maze.

In the footage, Reeves is barefoot and wears a T-shirt and loose cargo pants rolled up past her ankles. Her wavy, auburn hair blows in the wind.

"I did this early on so I was also thinking when you're a castaway you have all this time," she says. "What do you do with yourself and how do you fill up your time after you've covered your basic survival?"

Reeves envisions the Ashburton project as a continual video installation to be shown on four screens. A former curator at Toronto's Trinity Square Video, an artist-run media art centre, Reeves says she is attracted to her medium because of what it offers the audience.

"I've always liked installation because it allows the viewer a lot of control," she says. "You can go in and spend as much time with an installation as you want and if you love it you can spend as long as you want with it; if you hate it you can walk right out of the gallery again. With a screening you sit down and you have to watch it from beginning to end."

Reeves says her love of sequences is a natural complement to the art form.

"It has freedom for the viewer but also I'm really interested in cycles and you can't do that in a linear narrative that has a start, middle and end," she says. "Installation allows you to use also the physical space. Some video can be not just an image on a screen but it can actually inhabit space. That's what an installation can do that regular film can't."

Grand Manan Museum curator Anneke Gichuru admits she would love to premiere the work on the island, but she understands it is on a larger scale than what her space allows.

"I certainly think that people would be fascinated, depending on what she does," Gichuru says. "How much is directly related to Grand Manan and how much is from the country of her imagination is really hard to predict at this point."

Gichuru says artists have been interested in the Lord Ashburton shipwreck for years, but notes that Reeves' take is new.

"She has a totally different approach," she says. "I think she is seeing it in a very symbolic sort of way and she's seeing it in quite unconventional images. In the past, if people are doing a painting they're trying to make it very realistic and detailed in that way. But her idea of the feeling of climbing, the feeling of the waves and the wind ... I think this is very exciting."

"To me there is tremendous scope for this island to move and to inspire," Gichuru says. "I think the more I see of the world, and certainly in the North American context, this is a really unusual place and I think the sense of pride it could give to Grand Mananers would be a terrific thing."

Reeves plans to finish the piece by December and exhibit it internationally. She says the piece will encapsulate what it is to be on Grand Manan.

"I feel like already I've achieved what I was hoping to, to know how it is structured and to shoot most of the footage," she says. "I came with ideas but I didn't want them to take over. Once I was here I wanted the environment and the people in the story. I wanted it to live here."

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