



To Venice, with vigour

Barbara Fischer revels in her role as Canada's 'Wonder Woman' for the Venice Biennale

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Note: This article has been edited to correct a previously published version.

"If I drift from time to time, forgive me," Barbara Fischer says, laughing at herself as she pushes an unruly lock of silver-brown hair out of her eyes. "Maybe I'm getting older. Maybe it's too much coffee. I don't know."

To be fair, her recent schedule could wear down anyone, whether aged 52, as she is, or much younger. Last week, a quick pass-through in Los Angeles, a brief touchdown in Vancouver, and then back to Toronto where Fischer, as the director of the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto, is in deep: Never mind simply guiding the gallery's full-time staff of three on its mission to be the institution of record on contemporary art in Toronto, past, present and future (a mission, one would think, for a much larger venue; if you haven't noticed, there aren't any other takers.) No – the demands of Fischer's full-time job have been equalled this year with her role as the official curator of Canada's entry to this summer's Venice Biennale, the art world's equivalent of the Olympics, summer and winter, all at once.

For Canada's entry, Fischer chose Hamilton born-and-bred Mark Lewis, now a luminary of the London art scene. Lewis, for whom international acclaim has come from a body of work of languorous, meditative films on landscape and human intervention within them, created a new work for Fischer shot in Toronto this winter. Called *Cold Morning*, Lewis's distant, slow reveal of a frigid Toronto frames the city, and how we live in it, in a quietly unsettling new light.

Fischer was in L.A. to check in with Lewis, who was working on the piece, and then in Vancouver to partner with the Vancouver Art Gallery on a catalogue. Then home – for now, at least.

On Thursday night, the Barnicke gallery will host a Venice warm-up/send-off. (But don't expect to see the film – Venice prohibits the viewing of Biennale commissioned works before its own opening.) But do expect to see Fischer, smiling in a daze of exhaustion

amid the throng.

If she's feeling harried, it's hard to tell. Fischer, a low-key, earthy presence – today she wears faded black jeans, a charcoal fleece vest; glasses are perpetually perched on her head – exudes the cheery good nature and easy smile of someone perfectly in her element, whatever its demands may be.

"On my iPhone, the picture that comes up when she calls is Wonder Woman," says Kelly Mark, a prominent artist in the city, and the subject of a Fischer survey exhibition at Barnicke last year. "She's a workaholic. She always has been. But that's because she cares so much about what she does."

What Fischer does, of course, gets a lot of love returned, too. Fischer is a quiet champion of artists like Mark and James Carl – unabashedly Toronto-declared and studiously ignored (or so they often feel) by the big institutions here in their hometown, while abroad, their careers have flourished.

Fischer has made a mission of changing that. She produced a major survey of Carl's work at Barnicke last winter; her next one – once the Venice hysteria dies down – is of Will Kwan, with an ever-growing list of locals waiting in the wings.

"It just seems necessary," Fischer said, as she toured the Carl exhibition late last year. "This city really doesn't have a good history of taking care of its own. That's what I want to do here: Build a bit of memory bank, to have a sense of one thing relating to the other, that it's not just grabbed out of the air."

The Venice selection is, in many ways, an acknowledgment of a quiet career outside the mainstream that nonetheless rivals the productivity, relevance and ambition of anyone in Fischer's field.

After years at artist-run centres and smaller galleries, Fischer jumped to the big leagues, the AGO and then the Power Plant. But frustrated by institutional politics at that level, Fischer eventually went back to school for her M.A., with a mind to teaching.

But being engaged in the current of contemporary art remained an irresistible pull. When the position as director of the tiny Blackwood Gallery at the University of Toronto's Mississauga campus came up, she jumped.

Blackwood was no AGO – and that was the point. "University galleries have become really interesting all around," she says. "I mean, yes, they're small institutions, but I think those of us who have migrated there feel we've been able to come back to the real purpose of curating – which is to produce contemporary art with a sense of conviction."

At Blackwood, she curated a retrospective of the Toronto collective General Idea – one of Canada's best-known international art exports, and surely befitting a much larger institution – that travelled far and wide. "Eighteen venues around the world," she says.

It was at Blackwood that Fischer's project – to build a traceable history of Toronto art and artists – began. Against the grain, Fischer published catalogues for all exhibitions she had there, and made sure the shows toured. Fischer refused to let the

scale of things defeat her. "She could work at any museum in the world," Mark says. "She doesn't care about the brand name. She just looks at the art."

She carried the mandate with her to Barnicke, where she has assembled surveys shows for Mark and Carl; Mark's resulted in a major purchase of her work by the National Gallery of Canada, while NGC director Marc Mayer was looking closely at Carl's work at the time of his survey last winter. "It was sort of proof – `look, when we do something, it goes places.'"

Like with Lewis, who, despite having decamped for Europe, still makes roughly half his work in or near Toronto. The AGO has had a fall exhibition of Lewis' work planned since 2007, when he won the Iskowitz prize.

"It's such a great city, and it produces so much, constantly," she says. "And nobody seems to know about it. It's gut-wrenching, really. And it has to change."