

Westmount artist Laura Santini 'shells' out the ugly truth about endangered species



Published on April 16, 2012

Adrian Saldanha 

The exhibit, XTINCT on display at the McCord until May 26

If you've had any oysters in one of Montreal's seafood restaurants in the last two years, chances are pretty good that you have inadvertently helped create a work of art now on display at the McCord Museum.

Topics : [World Conservation Union](#) , [McCord Museum](#) , [Westmount](#) , [Liverpool](#) , [Island of Montreal](#)

In the museum lays a gigantic, 500-pound, life-sized representation of a polar bear. But in place of its snowy fur is a close-packed weave of white oyster shells.

The exhibit, XTINCT, is the latest work from sculptor Laura Santini, a Westmount resident since the age of 17. She spent the last two years collecting oyster shells from restaurants, like Joe Beef and Liverpool and many others throughout the island of Montreal.

"There were never enough! I would always have to go back for more and more," recalled Santini. "Some of the restaurants were very cooperative. Some would say, 'Who is this crazy lady!'"

Santini's studio quickly became filled with the discarded shells from all over the city. Nearly every day she would hand-pick through these same shells, looking for just the right one to fit next onto her weave of shells.

By the time her monumental piece was completed, she had hand-picked and sowed together nearly 2,500 oysters.

"It's slow, but it's relentless," said Santini of her work technique. "It doesn't stop. And this is a very strong parallel for me in my work. My technique really reflects the technique of extinction, so to speak."

It was in 2006 that the World Conservation Union first warned that the polar was soon to be endangered - the first step towards utter extinction. Since then a certain fascination for disappearing animals has captured Santini's imagination.

When she and her family first came to Canada from her native Italy, she remembered being in complete awe of the amount of wildlife Canadians enjoyed. "Thirty-five years ago, when I came to this country, who would've said that the polar bear would take this path?"

Santini also remembers a time when she and her husband were able to walk along the beach in Nova Scotia, and pick up wild mussels and clam and oysters. "But for the last few years there's nothing left, we cannot get anything."

*It was in 2006 that
the World
Conservation*

Memories like those stuck with Santini, until one day, she simply saw a polar bear made out of oyster shells. She committed to making that bizarre vision a reality ever since.

"The process of extinction is happening everywhere, and we really have to try and

*Union first warned
that the polar was
soon to be
endangered - the
first step towards
utter extinction.* -

do something," she said, while standing next her massive oyster-clad polar bear - a piece of art which could potentially outlast the actual polar bear species.

XTINCT was created to increase public awareness on the issue of endangered species and remind us of the harmful consequences of global warming on wild life and more particularly on the polar bear.

XTINCT will be on display at the McCord Museum until May 26.