

VERMIN & LUXURY

Janice Wright-Cheney's *Cellar*

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Lurking in a dark corner of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's (AGNS) fourth floor lies a wily paradigm of squalor and success. Janice Wright-Cheney's *Cellar* infests the gallery with hundreds of luxuriously made rats overrunning an antiquated grocery shop. Drawing upon cultural constructs of depravity and squalor associated with rats, Wright-Cheney toys with contradictory feelings of repulsion and attraction, drawing into question our notions of vermin.

Being trapped in a small abandoned space with hundreds of rats would terrify and disgust even the most stalwart. It is the stuff of nightmares and literary references, yet *Cellar* manages to make humans the interloper to the rats' domain—not the usual power hierarchy. Despite being creatures of the wild, this particular infestation inhabits what appears to be a once successful retail venture. Who could argue with the decision to live in a warm, sturdy building filled with an abundant food supply? But perhaps it is the opportune nature of rats that inspires such resentment and desire to eradicate the competition. There is no denying the damage and pestilence caused by rats, yet these ones almost beg to be petted or even rescued from their dark confinement. It is not immediately apparent whether these rats are here by choice or incarceration.

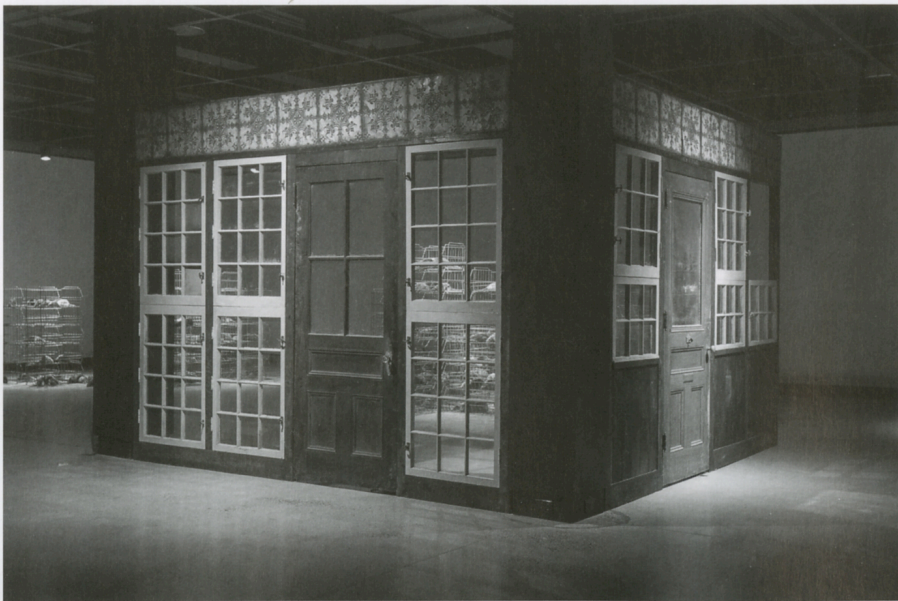
Cellar's rats hardly convey a Disney-like cuteness—rather their sensuousness and overcrowded conditions strike an empathy cord along with a shiver of revulsion. Immediately correlated with pestilence, decay and poverty, rats are also intelligent, social creatures and canny survivors when most other species fail. Despite our best efforts to eradicate the pest, they flourish. Ironically, we use *Warfarin*, a favoured rat poison, to save ourselves from heart disease. We despise the wild and prolific infestation, yet depend upon the sanitized, pink-eyed genetically modified lab team. It is a conflicted relationship that pervades our literature, vernacular and psyche.

Wright-Cheney's art practice is grounded in such contradictions. Her interest in the imposed orderliness of nature presented in natural history museums or zoology texts juxtaposes with its unruliness, particularly in regards to vermin. *Encroach* (2011), her exquisitely crafted cockroach installation, was show-cased in *Dirt, Detritus and Vermin* curated by Katie Belcher and Ingrid Jenkner at Mount Saint Vincent Art Gallery in 2011. *Cellar*, which she first exhibited at New Brunswick's Beaverbrook Art Gallery last year, continues her inquiry.

Wright-Cheney excels in her ability to transform a detested creature into a desirable object. Conversely, she also manages to transgress the luxury of a mink coat by metamorphosing it into a litter of rats. *Cellar's* rats retain the same meticulous attention to material, construction and context as her cockroaches. This time it



Janice Wright-Cheney, *Cellar*, 2012.
Recycled fur, felted wool, wood and found materials.



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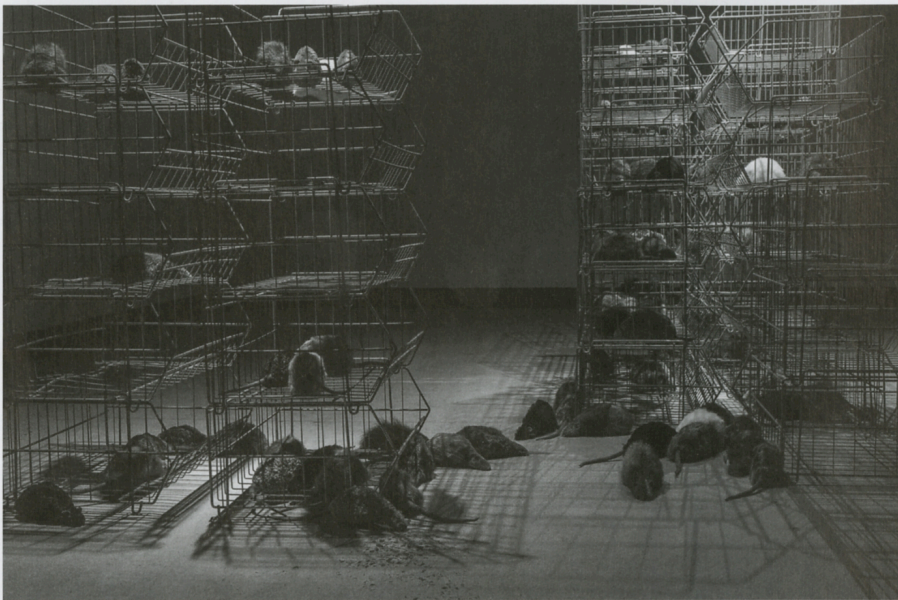
is an undertaking of immense proportions; I lost count at three hundred rats. Wright-Cheney’s creation acutely resembles the prolific fecundity of rats. Made from vintage fur coats and with hand-felted tails, the life-sized rats congregate en masse on, under and around an erratic maze of stacked wire storage containers reminiscent of old-time European grocery shelving. There is almost a crazy-cat-lady effect in the sheer number of soft furry creatures, until I see the tails.

The corner store theme reiterates through the installation’s space, which is bisected by a wall-to-wall old fashioned storefront replete with shop door, entablature of decorated panels and multi-paneled glass windows with their frames painted an acidic Paris Green. Apparently Paris Green was a 19th century arsenic-based artist pigment also used to exterminate rats in the Parisian sewer system. (Yet another subtly placed dichotomy of creation and destruction connecting humans and rats.) I can almost imagine I have entered an antiquated Parisian grocery overrun by rats in some dystopian future or maligned past, and my skin begins to crawl when I realize the implications.

Despite these hints of potential location, the space is ambiguous as well as unsettling. The AGNS installation forces entry through the ‘maze’ of dead-end aisles, but denies exit or entry through the locked door to the other side where even more rats are stacked in the cage-like containers. Neither side offers safety. Confined in an abandoned and inhibiting space that offers no respite from implicit danger, I suddenly become just another rat intent on escape and survival.

Wright-Cheney’s enticing and disturbing *Cellar* invites such reverse anthropomorphizing causing us to question assumptions of success and survival. ■

Audrey Nicoll is an artist and educator, who lives on the South Shore.



Janice Wright-Cheney, installation views of *Cellar* at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, 2012, Recycled fur, felted wool, wood and found materials.