



OPEN HOUSE

ISLAND LIVING

→ Photographer and teacher April Hickox lives in a small cottage on Toronto Island. Like many original island homes, it began as a tent 130 years ago. The island inspires much of Hickox's work. The light, the land, the water — and the community they sustain — are also integral to her home

Writer **Gordon Bowness** | Photography **Nicola Betts**

You've lived in this house for 27 years. Your parents rented an island home when you were three and bought one when you were seven. You must be considered a real islander by now.

Yes. But on the island, we always trace the history to whoever owned the house first. This was the Powers' house. I can tell because the old fir ceiling is original and on the back of the slats is the name of who ordered it. That wood was used everywhere. These rooms used to be like wooden crates.

You are a single mom but you and your neighbours form a very interdependent network.

Once I come home, my door is always open. There are always people coming and going and kids running in and out. I live here with my daughter Alexandra and Baby Cat. My "little family" consists of two other adults and three kids. And we do form an unusual relationship that's very supportive. I don't know what you'd call it. The kids can't call me grandma or auntie... they just call me April. But beyond that there is a whole extended family. That's just the way it is in small communities.

You've said you don't like to make large changes or renovate quickly. Why?

Every house comes with its own history. By the time I got this house, my own aesthetic was formed by island homes that are cobbled together with existing materials — it was green before the term was invented. I like keeping the feeling of a house.

What do you like best about the house?

It has many spaces both inside and out where I can work. And the light, of course.

Space is at a premium in island homes. Name one solution.

I got custom built-in cupboards, a desk and bookcases in my bedroom office. As a teacher and artist I use a lot of books. It's amazing to be able to see them all and just reach up and grab one.

Describe your art practise

I am most influenced by my life on the island. I have two types of art: landscape and object. Right now I'm following around park workers who create these huge compost heaps. The gardeners are trying to eradicate invasive species at the same time as they plant non-indigenous flowers in the formal gardens. These landscape works are part of my Leo Kamen show opening this month. One of my past object-based series featured photos of teacups nesting in piles. At the Free Bridge [an island community drop-off and exchange system, sort of like a free second-hand store] there were all these lovely teacups, broken but carefully mended. When someone's grandmother had died they were discarded. I love how objects hold memory.

Your art is in a downtown studio while your home is full of folk art. What do you love about these off-kilter objects?

I feel inspiration and creativity are self-generated, that they come from within yourself and from your own experiences. Folk art exemplifies that. It was once considered the garage sale of art but now is very popular and collectible.

You've put together the Line Art fundraising auction for the Gay, Lesbian and Trans Youth Line for the past two years. What do you get out of it?

The artists I've selected are a very diverse set of individuals, all very passionate about their work and their own identities, all wanting to support an incredible cause. When the work starts coming in, that's the exciting part for me. I just have to put it up.

You've been teaching a variety of photography courses fulltime at the Ontario College of Art and Design for 11 years. What is the most important thing you want your students to learn?

To find their own sense of their voice, of what drives them, and have the courage to speak about it in a visual way. Even if students

don't use the experience directly, being creative will always be in their hearts, in the way they think and work in the world. Ultimately, I hope they are happy.

LINE ART AUCTION. 8pm. Wed, Nov 10. Berkeley Church. (416) 962-2232. youthline.ca. See page 37 for more info.

COMPOST. Opening Sat, Nov 20, 2pm to 5pm. Until Dec 18. Leo Kamen Gallery. 80 Spadina Ave, #406. leokamengallery.com.

