



**GERALD BANTING**

IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE WOODS TODAY

August 26 - September 23





Images from left: *Into Thin Air*, *Fine Flight: In Memory of My Father*, *At the Edge*, *Let Her Be*, 1990-2005, oil on canvas, dimensions variable.

## IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE WOODS TODAY

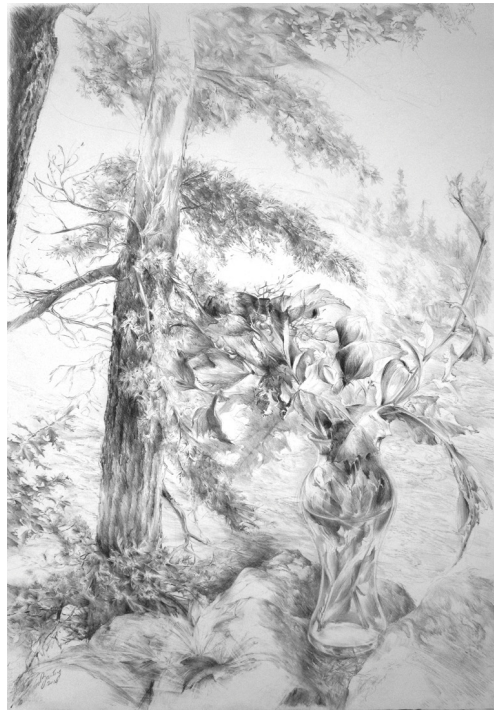
Essay by Sandy Saad, Curator of Exhibitions and Education, Visual Arts Centre of Clarington

"If you go down to the woods today..." is the first line in the 1907 children's song, "The Teddy Bear's Picnic". The song made its way into pop culture since the 1932 Henry Hall rendition and has been widely recorded, as incidental music in TV series, commercials and films. "The Teddy Bear's Picnic" personifies *every bear that ever there was* as a participant in an annual picnic in the woods, described as both wondrous and mysterious. The popular ballad advises children to stay home, suggesting that the woods could be dangerous, while enticing them to mischievously explore it, as it can also be a marvelous place.

Gerald Banting has had a perennial relationship with the woods. As a child, he spent much of his time seeking the forests of Bowmanville for escape, adventure, and exploration. These memories of local woods and streams have grown into a relationship with the outdoors, offering him over three decades of creative inspiration. This rapport has motivated him to foster a love of nature in his students as a high school teacher, and produce a substantial body of artwork as an artist. Banting's drawings, paintings, and collages are a



Image: *Into Thin Air*, 1990, oil on canvas, 71" x 48".



Images from left: *Fine Flight: In Memory of My Father*, 1994, oil on canvas, 71" x 48", *Still Life with Dark Glasses*, 2015, pencil drawing, 39" x 29.5".

reflection of his interconnection with nature, specifically trees, and his paradoxical relationship with them. *If You Go Down to the Woods Today* surveys Banting's lifelong inspiration and creative expression through his time spent in the forests near Bowmanville, and beyond.

Standing a tall six feet, Banting's paintings have presence; they evoke in the viewer a smallness reminiscent of the immersive experience of being in a forest. They elicit a sense of movement, time, weather, season, and change. His fractured compositions suggest chopping or breaking of tree parts, and other times his treatment of paint produces a smoky opaque fog that evokes a sense of fire, burning. These melancholic expressions contrast with rays of light and soft gestural brushstrokes. With varying tones of greens, browns, blues, and reds, Banting combines hard edges with soft gestures, as well as elements of abstraction and realism, suggesting contradiction and



Image: Pencil drawings from the Small Gallery, 1993 - 2009, dimensions variable.





Image: Small Gallery installation, 1976 - 2016, works on paper.

echoing Banting's paradoxical relationship with nature. His image sources are the trees he loves and lives with in the fields of his home in Brighton, Ontario. Pines, cedars, and maples appear as the subject matter of his artwork. Banting's paintings reflect his own meditations on his complex affinity for the trees he admires. He recognizes the contradiction: the trees must be pruned for safety, and wood burned to help heat his home. He is faced with the inevitable task of reducing them, partly for his own survival.

In addition to Banting's paintings, his drawings on paper are evidence of his careful examination of trees. Meticulous in detail, they offer insight into Banting's evolving practice, his experimentation with varying compositions. He combines elements of still life with landscape, hard-edge lines with soft gestures, and plays with multidimensional space. In some works, Banting's subtly inserted objects reveal themselves to the watchful and meditative viewer. The drawings are accompanied by a series of collages and prints, many produced by Banting in the 1970's, during the early stages of his adult artistic practice. They offer insight into Banting's attempts to explore pattern, texture, and composition, which would come into play in his paintings.



The exhibition ends with the *Mayday Project* in the Loft Gallery, an installation that brings together Banting's active conservation efforts with his artistic practice. After making over fifty visits to the Bowmanville Valley Conservation Area, he collected over a thousand water bottles, pop cans, coffee cups, and other found objects that had been discarded in the protected wildlife habitat. Their accumulated mass is a sobering



Images: Installation and detail shots of *The Mayday Project*, 2018, Loft Gallery, VAC.



Image: Installation shot of *The Mayday Project*, 2018 in the Loft Gallery.

testament to mistreatment of the environment. Along with the litter, the installation features a large collection of wood pieces Banting has amassed. Similar to his paintings, they are broken parts of trees that have been cut and, in some cases, burned. Throughout a long, winding installation of textured and patterned fragmented wood, viewers can find small toys, air-gun pellets, chicken wire, aerosol spray cans and other things taken from the Bowmanville Conservation Area. Their combination offers a stark juxtaposition of things that should not be found together, as one harms the other. The installation includes a series of imprinted paintings by Banting as a method of making art out of materials found as trash. Close examination reveals imprints of pop cans, leaves, water bottles and other found objects repurposed as tools for Banting's continuous experimentation with composition, colour, and texture.

*If You Go Down to the Woods Today* offers insight into Banting's deep reflection on his relationship with trees and nature. His self-reflection, care for nature, and conservation efforts allow us to question our own actions. Humans need the outdoors, not only to survive, but to be whole psychologically and spiritually. The beauty and power of the natural environment, and the magical way in which certain places contribute to one's psychospiritual equipoise, are evident in Banting's artistic practice. His drawings and paintings reward the watchful eye, revealing more of themselves, and his installation makes us question our actions and contributions (good or bad) to the environment. His work offers a new ways of seeing trees and navigating forests, and invites us to go down into the woods.



Images from left: *Torn Feelings*, *Grumpy Fish*, *In the Heat of the Moment*, *Blood in the Water* and *Blazing a Trail* from *19 Printed and painted images with bottles, cans, and leaves: oil based inks and acrylic paints, 2017-18*. Each panel is 12" x 17.5".





Image: Installation shot of *The Mayday Project*, 2018 in the Loft Gallery.

## BIOGRAPHY

Gerald Banting was born in Bowmanville, Ontario and has been teaching and artmaking in Brighton, Ontario for over four decades. His multimedia practice includes collage, painting, drawing, sculpture, and most recently installation, focusing much of his subject matter on trees, including hard maples, white pines, and white cedars.



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## EVENTS PROGRAM

Closing Reception: Sunday, September 23, 2 - 4pm.

Includes a short gallery tour and a walking tour through Soper Creek (weather permitting)


The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington,  
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## GALLERY HOURS

Monday: Closed

Tuesday: 10am - 9pm

Wednesday: 10am - 9pm

Thursday: 10am - 9pm

Friday - Sunday: 10am - 4pm

Executive Director: Dionne Powlenzuk

Curator of Exhibitions & Education: Sandy Saad

Marketing Coordinator: Áine Belton

Development Coordinator: Vivienne Song

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