

# Text messaging, of the old school

High-school thoughts adorn bus shelters, courtesy Toronto artists

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Barrie students are having the disconcerting experience in some of the city's bus shelters when they discover a slick, large-scale photo showing the back of some kid they may know heading toward the entrance of an area high school they're pretty sure they do know.

But that's not the weird part. The weird part comes with reading the text superimposed in white letters against the image of the anonymous student's back and finding that it's expressing the most intimate stuff imaginable, about the fears, hopes and uncertainties of being a high school student in Barrie. What's being sold here?

"So there's this double-take thing, when people start thinking 'That's not an ad but maybe it is an ad because ads are so clever these days,'" says Kim Tomczak, the Toronto artist who created... *bump in the night, Barrie*, the bus shelter photo suite, with partner Lisa Steele. The text used is derived from interviews the couple conducted last May with 20 students, used, like the images, anonymously. Seeing the images in an unexpected environment "allows people to get engaged with it, which is something we really want to happen," Tomczak says. "It creates the kind of a reaction — and I hate to say this — that's hard to get in a gallery."

In fact, ... *bump in the night, Barrie* was commissioned by Carolyn Bell Farrell of the MacLaren Art Centre, the city's compact gallery with a



SARAH DEA FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak, left, are the acclaimed Toronto couple — well known for their use of public urban space — behind Barrie's latest public-art project, which allows passersby to think, at first, that it's advertising.

big-city-power attitude when it comes to creating shows or securing exhibitions.

Bell Farrell had seen earlier versions of Steele/Tomczak's... *bump in the night* designated for Toronto, Stuttgart and Caen, France, at a show at the Diaz Contemporary gallery. But she felt that the next version would be best shown as a public art project, in places where it would reach young people given that Barrie is "considered the youngest city in Canada, given the demographics," she says.

Steele and Tomczak certainly brought a calm receptivity to urban environments' individuality. *Wartable*, their LED light installation near the Toronto waterfront recently, seemed to suspend Lake Ontario tidal flow in the air.

Over the past 20 years or more — Steele and Tomczak first collaborated in 1982 while editing her 1981 tape, *Some Call It Bad Luck* — they've emerged as the most reli-



able brand name in Canadian new media circles. Look to the unrivalled array of awards, including a Toronto Arts Award and the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media arts in 2005 for lifetime achievement, as proof.

Co-founders of VTape, they helped grow the Toronto media centre, where they're still active. VTape now has the largest and most prestigious video archives in North Amer-

## Tomczak/Steele investigates urban environment

ica. As professors in the visual studies program at the University of Toronto, they helped shape the careers of many dozens of emerging artists. (They are among that rare group of artists who flat out love teaching.)

So... *bump in the night, Barrie* represents the latest in a long line of public works — last year's *Speak City* is a 30-minute video medita-

tion on Toronto street signs in 140 neighbourhoods — from a couple whose work increasingly investigates the built environment. They're good at it. According to Pattison Outdoor Advertising, which worked with the MacLaren, ... *bump in the night, Barrie* generated some 2.9 million views last month.

But the public side of Steele/Tomczak has taken media attention away from some recent, in-

tensely private work. (Because of their first names, "there's a common assumption we're a lesbian couple," says Steele. "We even won a woman's festival in Vienna.")

"It's about what happens to you in a long-term collaboration," says Steele as we sit around the table in their central Toronto house. The art on the wall is well chosen and

contemporary. The books in their cases indicate scholars live here. Yet there's something old fashioned about this home; Ozzie and Harriet would not have felt out of place.

"It's a collaboration that has extended to every aspect of our lives," she continues. "Our early work was also very much about the relationship, and our relationship to the world, to media, to art, to censorship. We felt it was totally what we had to do, although it was very hard to do. I remember going out on a lot of long walks."

*We're Getting Younger All the Time* and *Practicing Death*, the first two parts of "Trilogy," the title of the new piece, are finished. The last part isn't coming easily. "It's basically about post-life, about when one of us is no longer here," says Tomczak. "For years now — forever, it seems — we've been stuck. We keep coming up with ideas only to realize they obviously didn't work. Lisa said that maybe we should get hypnotized to get us past this point. I kept thinking, 'Couldn't we do party drugs instead?'"

Eventually he capitulated. Earlier this year both spent an hour being taped under hypnosis then both sleeping for about two days straight after their sessions. Their tapes haven't been looked at. "But we think it got us past this bump," says Steele.

"What's surprised us is the need to continually put yourself forward," she continues. "Potentially, it might be expected that artists of our stature — with all the awards and stuff — would be able to say, 'Okay, that's enough.' But that's not the case."

Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak's... *bump in the night, Barrie* can be found in eight select Barrie transit shelters until Nov. 7.