

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

John Bulmer

Whimsy by Janice Horton

In the Adirondacks, whimsy is everywhere. Shortened from “whim-wham”, it’s an odd notion, something fanciful or unexpected. Like the two round-mouthed dummy paddlers poised to go over the edge of the roof at the Canada Lake Store in the Town of Caroga Lake. You expect to see moose silhouettes, bears holding mailboxes and loon-shaped house numbers in the Adirondacks. Signs in the wilderness *ought* to be made from rough slabs of hemlock or boards with saw-toothed edges. Retired oars and buzz-saw blades make the medium the message.

Whimsy is the language that tells you where you are. Las Vegas writes in neon; our symbols are antlers and stylized pine trees. No matter where you go, whimsies overused become icons. If there’s a twelve-foot-tall steer out front, it’s a safe bet there’s a BBQ corral inside, pardner. Some whimsy makes you turn the car around for a second look, like the picket fence fashioned from skis spotted along Route 10 in southern Hamilton County.



Whimsy is what happens when an object begs to be seen in a different perspective. Like those round bales of hay shrink-wrapped in white plastic that dot the fields. Does it take much imagination to see a marshmallow farm? I’m waiting to see one or two bales impaled on a Paul Bunyan-esque skewer over a faux campfire.

Whimsy is what you do with an object that’s outlived its reason for being. What good is an old plow blade until you weld on some buggy eyeballs and turn it into an oversized cricket? Probably too many things have been re-purposed as flowerpots: big tractor tires, water heaters cut in half and toilet bowls. Those little shanties with a moon cut out over the door have been known to get a new identity as a potting shed in an upscale garden—privies with panache. There is a line, somewhere between clever and kitsch, that gets crossed when the stuff is mass-produced. You can buy a



readymade scarecrow whose stuffing won’t fall out but it’s not the same as a pair of real overalls and a shirt that’s been worn. And forget about anything that must be inflated. Please.

In the Adirondacks, whimsy knows just how much it can get away with. A twenty-foot-tall, plaid-shirted, axe-wielding (albeit smiling) woodsman is a worthy representative of a lumberyard, more fitting than a late model Chevy sawn in half to demonstrate low, low prices. Whimsy shows up at just the right interval. Like a chunk of green pepper in the chili, a bigger than life heron adds a little rush of flavor to keep the bowl interesting. Miles of unspoiled wilderness, with another shining lake around the bend are the essence of the place. But endless stands of birch and pine aren’t diminished by a joke now and then any more than when the minister comes out with a gentle one-liner to unfreeze the nervous bride and groom. They remember, then, not to take themselves too seriously. In the same way, a chubby, chainsaw-carved bear holding a fishing rod reminds us that the wilderness is awesome, but not unapproachable.

Whimsy needn’t be supersized. Small touches like cupboard pulls made of knots, an antler to hang your hat on, birch bark frames and anything made from twigs testify that this is the Adirondacks. The great “camps” of the Vanderbilts and J.P. Morgans gave Adirondack style status. Perhaps whimsy takes the embarrassment out of the riches.

The Adirondacks aren’t the only place you’ll find antler chandeliers and tree-trunk bedposts, but I’m sure the upstate New York mountains wouldn’t be the same place without them. In front of a children’s playground, a pair of brawny carved owls stand at the gate. You were expecting clowns or bunnies?

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