

**The time capsule** has landed. Shaped like a giant spinning top, more than three metres high, encrusted with barnacles and mineral deposits, it stands on the north shore of False Creek, just west of the Cambie Street Bridge. Indigenous plants—gum weed, dune grass, Nootka rose—surround its site, and the high tide laps at its three bulbous feet. On the seawall, joggers, cyclists, and dog walkers stop and stare. Beyond, a harbour seal raises its head above the surface of the water, sleek and curious.

*Time Top*, a public sculpture by the late West Coast artist Jerry Pethick, is a blast from the past. It's a retro-sci-fi form he conceived during the first years of the 21st century—and the last years of his life. The artist died of cancer in July 2003, but left behind a complete set of drawings and plans for the work's completion. Immediately after his death, his widow, Margaret Pethick, took over the project.

"It was ready to go," she says, by phone from her Hornby Island home. "Jerry had done all the specs, he'd got all the subcontractors lined up, so we just had to follow instructions." Which is a modest assessment of her three years of concerted work. Along with project managers Eric Vanderzee and Patrick Ready, and with the support and encouragement of Brian Newson, public-art program manager for Vancouver, Margaret assumed responsibility for completing the sculpture. This included securing a permanent site for *Time Top*; overseeing its casting, surface treatment, and installation; the manufacture of a transparent-plastic, dome-shaped cap; the engraving of granite capstones for the adjacent seawall; and the development of companion publications.

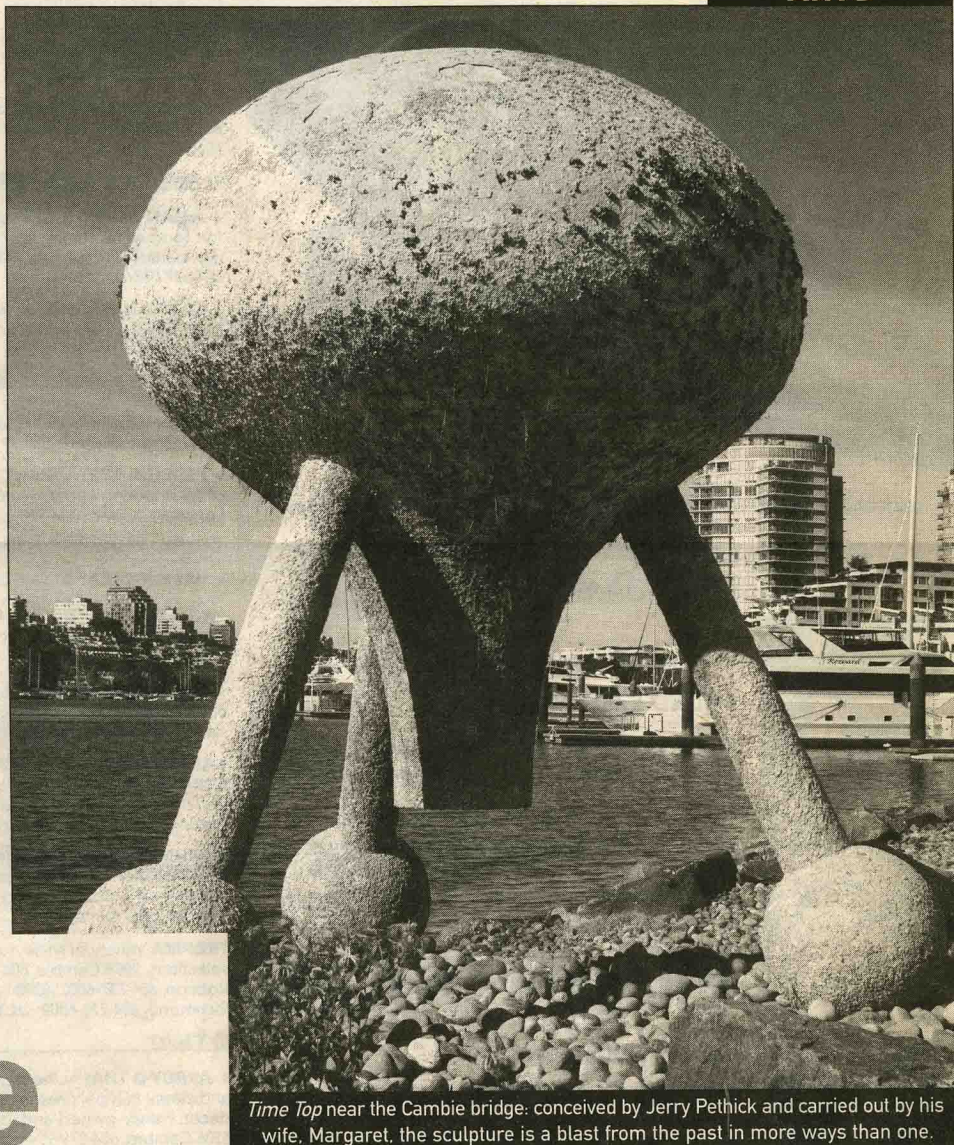
# Time capsule

**Three years after his death, Jerry Pethick's retro-sci-fi public artwork finally lands on False Creek**

(A comic book, catalogue, and brochure are planned, the comic to be issued at *Time Top*'s official launch in early October.)

Margaret quotes excerpts from Jerry's original proposal to Concord Pacific Group, Inc., the developer that commissioned *Time Top* in 2001. "In 1942, I lived in a house with an arch between the living room and the dining room," she reads, her late husband's words resonating over the slightly static phone line. Jerry Pethick, who was born in London, Ontario, in 1935 and grew up there, was enchanted as a child by a smaller curved opening set within that arched connecting wall. "It separated the present from another time and through its gateway my imagination could soar, like Britt Bradford's *Time Top*." The latter allusion is to a comic strip by William Ritt and Clarence Gray, in which a time-travelling machine features briefly—before its creators sent it spinning into the ocean.

It was Pethick's poetic conceit that the fictional *Time Top* was real and had been recovered from



*Time Top* near the Cambie bridge: conceived by Jerry Pethick and carried out by his wife, Margaret, the sculpture is a blast from the past in more ways than one.

the ocean floor, a relic of both the past and the future. He was interested in using his sculpture to

evoke a childlike sense of wonder by creating an enigmatic object that could transport its viewers into another realm of awareness. "The idea of form transmitting something other than material context encourages a fresh perception," he wrote.

Margaret Pethick recalls her husband's long fascination with space. "It wasn't space as space travel, intergalactic travel; it was space that surrounds everything, space that for Jerry was another material." He was also intrigued with illusory space and the science of optics. In the 1960s and '70s, Pethick was a pioneer of holographic art, but eventually gave it up for more immediate and low-tech materials and techniques, such as plastic Fresnel lenses mounted over rows of sequential photographs. The resulting low-resolution illusion of three dimensions allowed the viewer's imagination to drift in what the artist called "daydream space".

To give *Time Top* the appearance of a marvelous capsule that has been under water for decades, the sculpture was cast in silicon bronze at the Harman Foundry in Sechelt, then submerged

for two years in a marina in nearby Gibsons, where it was attached to a low-voltage electrical charge. This attracts minerals that, in turn, attract sea life such as mussels and barnacles, Margaret explains of the assisted accretion process (originally developed in the United States as a means of restoring coral reefs and protecting shorelines).

On August 2, a crowd of excited viewers welcomed *Time Top* to its site. Friends of the Pethicks, fellow artists, poets, curators, designers, consultants, Pethick's Vancouver dealer, and one lone art critic—all of us whooped and applauded as the work arrived in False Creek by sea. When it hove into view, *Time Top* was mounted on a barge, accompanied by a small flotilla chugging eastward from English Bay. A few hours earlier, the sculpture had been hoisted by crane from the marina in Gibsons, and now it was being lifted again, then lowered onto its permanent foundation.

An almost ecstatic mood of anticipation was palpable throughout the day. It was as if we were awaiting the landing of a marvellous craft, not from outer space but from the mysterious past. In a sense, we were. Jerry Pethick's posthumous sculpture speaks to us, now and for always, of wonderment, humour, and the fantastic possibilities of the human imagination. ♦