

PRAIRIE GOTHIC

SASKATCHEWAN: October 22 to January 12, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina

Just what is it that makes Prairie art so darkly delicious? *Prairie Gothic*, curated by Timothy Long for the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, explores the roots of what has become the prairie sensibility — art that observes from a place of isolation, thinks deeply and speaks drily.

The exhibition spans four decades, featuring new acquisitions and old favourites from the Gallery's permanent collection, including sculpture by Graeme Patterson, Ann James, Bill Burns, and Victor Cicansky, and drawings by Marcel Dzama and Lorne Beug. The theme was inspired by research in conjunction with *Tactile Desires: The Work of Jack Sures*, a retrospective the MacKenzie co-curated with the Tom Thomson Art Gallery, which will run concurrently before touring nationally.

To understand *Prairie Gothic*, we must go deeper than a set of small-town secrets. Historically referring to vernacular architecture also known as Folk Victorian or Carpenter Gothic, the term refers to a 19th-century revival of Northern European Renaissance mixed with factory production. Decorative elements were mass-produced well into the 1940s — entire houses could be ordered by catalogue. In 1930, painter Grant Wood chose to document the contradictions inherent in the fad, with a portrait of a couple and their house, *American Gothic*. Today, the dour farm-wife standing beside her man is one of the most parodied images in North America, and has become a meme for heartland values. Wood himself is remembered as a staunch regionalist, a keen observer, but also a wit who had no time for the pompous — these qualities still resonate in the work of prairie artists today.

Juxtaposing an outhouse, a pin-up girl and a pickle, the light-hearted earthiness of Cicansky's sculpture, is an early example of humour in Saskatchewan art, and the hallmark wit of *Prairie Gothic*, influenced by visiting artists such as David Gilhooly and other members of the California Funk art movement. Embodying locality, irony and humour, Funk opposed the dominant universalizing abstraction of Modern art previously established in Saskatchewan by the Regina Five and the Emma Lake workshops. Funk also opened the door to incorporating and critiquing the other great universalizing force of the 20th century, pop culture.

The darker desires and grittier reality in *Prairie Gothic* come from Sures, another influential artist and teacher. Long's research for a retrospective on Sures revealed early contact with French Surrealism, themes of sexuality, and humour through absurd juxtaposition. But for Sures, the work developed with a different purpose. Instead of unlocking the subconscious, Sures reflects on the physical world. Nature, in his sculptures, is impartial, deadly, fecund, fantastic, primal. The work of Bill Burns, represented with selections from *Safety Gear for Small Animals*, typifies this dark mirror, a playful examination.

Deadpan, *Safety Gear* proposes solutions for animals whose lives have been disrupted by human development, wars, or pollution. Animal prosthetics — ridiculous or inevitable? The connection between humans and animals runs the gamut, from callous injury to intense rehabilitation efforts. Burns highlights our conflicting desires. We all want to defend the planet, yet are implicated in its destruction.

Traveling the prairies, Long has often read the socio-economic history of farms in their outbuildings. This drew him to include Graeme Patterson's work, *The Grain Bins* (excerpted from his installation, *Woodrow*.) Floating island-like on a table top, the hand-made diorama models the history of grain storage — an old square wooden bin, two round bins, one in wood, one metal, and the gleaming metal hopper, on stilts. Inside, three short stop-motion animations play out the social life on this farm, slapstick one-upmanship between two brothers, Pierre and Gerrard.

Isolated, yet connected. Sharply funny, critical and yet earnest, with a love of local spaces and community — these works evidence a "make do with what you have" practicality, dosed with cabin fever. This sensibility has led to epic, wily invention by a rising number of prairie artists including Guy Maddin, Diana Thorneycraft, Chris Reid, Sylvia Ziemann, Gerald Saul, Twyla Exner, Neal McLeod, David Hoffos, and Shanell Papp. *Prairie Gothic* is about more than a place, it's a state of mind. — Margaret Bessai



ABOVE: Bill Burns, *Safety Gear for Small Animals*, (detail), mixed media, 2004.

BELOW: Graeme Patterson, *Woodrow*, installation view.



LEFT: COLLECTION OF THE MACKENZIE ART GALLERY. PHOTO: BLAIR ROBINSON.