

APRIL 6 AND 7, 2013  
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR: CHRYSTENE ELLS  
ORGANIZED BY SASKATCHEWAN FILMPOOL COOPERATIVE  
AND DUNLOP ART GALLERY

*In Situ*

I PUFF:  
INTERNATIONAL  
PUPPET UNDERGROUND  
FILM FESTIVAL

*The Surreality of Saskatchewan Puppets*

by Christina Stojanova

*Surrealism is not an artistic style, but a means of investigating  
and exploring reality.*

*Jan Švankmajer<sup>1</sup>*

*Video Club  
prop from  
Spitly: A boy and  
his puppet, 2013  
felt and thread*

*Saskatchewan, a land of ghosts, a land of broken dreams and  
broken promises, a land of stories, many untold, a land of  
desperate beauty of abandon.*

*Chrystene Ells, Kathleen's Diary<sup>2</sup>*

The first International Underground Puppet Film Festival (IPUFF) took place in Regina on April 6 and 7, 2013. It is however hard to imagine that the source of its extraordinary creative and emotional energy was one person – its artistic director Chrystene Ells. Ells has been involved with the Saskatchewan Filmpool as an artist in residence, and masterminded the ambitious project *This Big World* (2011-2012), “featuring animated objects films based on stories drawn from Saskatchewan archival sources,”<sup>3</sup> out of which IPUFF evolved.

The Dunlop’s *PuppExhibition*, curated by Ells alongside with Dunlop’s Curator of Outreach and Education, Wendy Peart, showcased artefacts from “nineteen new home-grown Saskatchewan puppet films,” also curated by Ells and premiered at the festival.<sup>4</sup> The exhibition featured lovingly restored period objects and décor, ingeniously crafted 3D puppets, and cut-out marionettes. Indeed, romantic ruins and puppets, along with marionettes and mannequins, have been long considered “prized emblems of surrealism,” as art historian Hal Foster – following André Breton, the first theoretician and guru of surrealism – writes in *Compulsive Beauty*, his 1993 seminal take on the highly charged nexus of surrealism

and psychoanalysis.<sup>5</sup> In straddling the contrasting realms of the “real and the imagined,” the “physical and the psychic reality,” the period-era Saskatchewan artefacts conjured memories from the depth of the collective unconscious. Like Bretonian ruins, they too have captured “the natural entropy of cultural progress,” while the puppets and marionettes emphasized its “status as both intimate and alien.”<sup>6</sup> By blurring the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate through the “usurpation of the referential by the symbolic,” the exhibition was evocative of Surrealism not only in the brighter Bretonian sense of a heightened, sur-reality of miraculous deliverance through *amour fou* (crazy love), but also – as Foster has it – as the uncanny return of familiar images made strange by repression.<sup>7</sup> A moustached puppet, for example, of a Saskatchewan *commis-voyageur* of Middle-Eastern descent – who is yet to star in an upcoming film by Ells and Berny Hi – invokes local children’s memoirs of his delicious merchandise that have lingered long after his sudden and probably tragic disappearance. A strikingly unusual personage both physically and ethnically for the historical prairie countryside, this puppet bestrides uncanny surrealist ironies of life and death, the alien

Other and the homesteaders, the colonial past and Saskatchewan's present-day multicultural milieu.

The creative alchemy behind the *PuppExhibition* exhibits and videotaped "makings of," including secrets of the masterfully realistic puppetry (moustaches of real hair!), as well as intricate camerawork and lighting, were further elucidated in Ells and Hi's artists talk, *PuppetFilms and You*.

The narratives of the nineteen "home grown" puppet films reveal various layers of the Saskatchewan collective memory, unearthed in the Regina Public Library's Prairie History Room, and range from Aboriginal fairy tales, to homesteaders' memoirs and diaries, to stories illustrating "the lovely weirdness of historical Saskatchewan."<sup>8</sup> This passion for mnemonics comes as no surprise: "since the early 1990s, memory practices have enjoyed an emphatic presence in the arts."<sup>9</sup> Stimulated by historical scholarship and museum culture, interested in personalizing traumatic historical events such as the Holocaust and the Canadian residential schools, it has also been predicated on fear of identity loss and the ubiquitous (post) modern memory crisis. Moreover, Saskatchewan independent films,

made with the support of Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative, have been "particularly focused on memory practices as means of bridging the gap between present and past, real and imaginary, nostalgia and irony, and inspiring new approaches to the 'current dynamics of the fragmented memory politics of different social groups.'"<sup>10</sup>

What invariably stands out in the animated ingenuity of the nineteen films – the prairie's open vistas, reflecting the tempestuous *hieros gamos* (or marriage of opposites) between Heaven and Earth in a rich colour palette – springs forcefully from the depths of Saskatchewan collective unconscious, the shared matrix of all this memory work. One of the outstanding films, *Kathleen's Diary* by Chrystene Ells, opens with stalks of wheat quavering against Heaven and Earth, merged into a stormy white-brown-black tableau, over which the film's yearning address to Saskatchewan as a "land of desperate beauty of abandon" is heard as a most fitting introduction to the wittily animated diary, kept from 1937 to 1945. Displayed in different formats at *PuppExhibition*, the accomplished props of Kathleen's dilapidated home and farm were miraculous landmarks of the now extinct small-town Saskatchewan.

Registering the war in Europe, locust infestations, and deaths of horses and people with identical casualness, the film evokes an inherently surreal confusion of sacred and profane, and the “immanence of death in life” therein.<sup>11</sup> The dark-blue sky, enveloping the green-brown summer prairie scenery in *We Remain Long After We’re Gone*, by Tyler Banadyga, emphasizes the jarring guilt, felt upon an accidental disinterring of Aboriginal remains, buried – both literally and metaphorically – under the author’s ancestral homestead. The soft brown sky, studded with flower-like clouds in Kristen Smith’s *My Great Grandmother’s Flowers*, on the other hand, interweaves doilies and flower patterns within the yarn of the truncated life of a Findlater woman, spun by 3D replicas of her hands and feet, and recanted in Ukrainian with English subtitles.

*Musophobia*, by Amber Christensen, stages the oneiric mise-en-scène of a young Flaxcombe teacher’s psyche, afflicted by obsessive fear of mice. Experimenting with cut-out puppets, sound, colour, and even with the iconic image of St. Gertrude of Nivelles, the film playfully implies the tenuous boundary between the profane and the sacred. In this vein of surreal juxtaposition of incongruous elements, involving a multitude of

Salvador Dalí’s signature dials in various designs, Berni Hi’s film, *George Bassler’s Perpetual Motion Machine*, conjures the memoir of a Saskatchewan maverick, who after the loss of his family becomes “possessed marvellously but mechanically” – therefore uncannily – by the idea of *perpetuum mobile*, an ancient alchemical and surrealist dream.<sup>12</sup>

*Love in Any Colour*, by Jessica Reiss, is yet another Saskatchewan evocation of the “immanence of death in life,” but of the miraculous kind, where the “rupture in the natural order is divine in origin and a challenge to rational causality.”<sup>13</sup> Under the translucent, ash-coloured harvest moon, a cut-out of a murdered girl’s skeleton comes alive in the embrace of the shadow puppet of loving fisherman. In Jessica Generoux’s *Qu’Appelle*, shadow puppets again intimate a sacred love-story against penciled sketches of the eponymous valley and Melissa Worme’s soulful singing in Cree and English.

Actually, in most of the films the “rupture in the natural order” is of the uncanny kind, since the supernatural is explained and is therefore “not necessarily divine in origin and a challenge to rational causality.”<sup>14</sup> In *It Was a Circus*, also by Chrystene Ells, for example,



crushed paper shot through coloured filters results in a sublime blood-red prairie sunset, which intensifies the hilarity of three shadow puppets of tipsy men, circa 1907, getting seriously spooked before realizing that the source of their fear is a boar with its snout stuck in a syrup can. Similarly, the serene winter light, glowing from the painted skies in Rowan Pantel's *Mike and the Goose* reinforces the uncanny effect of an overzealous mother goose attacking a small farm boy, who is then saved by his *babushka*. Pantel's 3D puppets exhibited in the gallery reconfirmed the sophisticated artistry behind this little gem of a film, based on a 1940s family memoir.

More illustrative – and miraculous, which is typical for folkloric discourses – visions of prairie skies and light are to be found in the Qu'Appelle winter tale, *A Place for You* by Angela Edmunds, which tells the story of an unusual friendship between a cut-out fox and chicken. Heaven and Earth become a stylized pink background in Kelly-Anne Reiss' *Scotty*, another Saskatchewan fairy tale about the love of an Eastend T. Rex for a shadow puppet she-dino. The marvellous prairie horizon gradually palisades into an aloof neutral backdrop for the shadow puppetry of Janine Windolph's

uncanny residential school story about the ghost of priest, *Joshua*, and disappears altogether in *Macnut: A Tale of Revenge*, Eric Kanius' account of a 1960s settling of scores, imagined in the style of a cartoon Western. In *A Gentlemen's Quarrel*, by Noelle Duddridge, the prairie vistas are replaced by a formal black background for a quasi-duel between two Regina musicians presented as white cut-out puppets is justified by the abstractly chic style of early black and white silent movies, complete with intertitles.

Another highpoint at the *PuppExhibition* was the histrionic 3D puppet of an archetypal housewife from yesteryear, perched by a stove and a clothesline, clutching a mop. In Gerald Saul's *It's About Time*, she is aptly paired with a shadow puppet of her husband, whose rattling adventures through a white, garage-like opening unto a grey backdrop signify the world's rare intrusions into the woman's domestic bondage. A similarly uncanny confusion, ensuing from a "rupture in the established order" – whether due to agoraphobia as in Paul Atkins and Ian Campbell's *Cabin Fever*, childhood obsession in Video Club's *Spitly*, or a bout of epilepsy in Red Smarteez' *First Seizure* – is captured again by 3D puppets which best conflate the intimate and



Rowan Pantel, props from *Mike and the Goose*, 2013, mixed media

the alien, and the “immanence of death in life.”

Amidst this creative plenitude, the dispute whether *Saskatchewan is Boring*, staged in Sylvia Ziemann’s film between 3D puppets of a crow and a prairie dog, sounds absurdly out of place. And yet it serves as an ambiguous coda, straddling the surreal contraries of the self-ironic and the self-effacing, the real and the imagined. For in all of its amazing manifestations in *PuppExhibition* and on film, Saskatchewan’s land of “desperate beauty of abandon” and its historical marvels continue to remain deeply revered yet lamentably overlooked.

- <sup>1</sup> Jan Švankmajer, in Peter Hames, “Interview with Jan Švankmajer,” *Sight and Sound*, 11:10 (October 2001), 27.
- <sup>2</sup> Chrystene Ells, *Kathleen’s Diary*, 2012, video, 6:00.
- <sup>3</sup> Tricia Martin, “Chrystene Ells’ Big Word,” *Splice*, (Winter 2012), 7.
- <sup>4</sup> IPUFF program, (Regina: Dunlop Art Gallery and Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative, April 6-7, 2013), 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 21.
- <sup>6</sup> Foster, 7.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> IPUFF program, 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Christina Stojanová, “Private Regina: The Poetics and Politics of Memory,” in *Mind the Gap*, eds. Christine Ramsay and Randal Rogers (Regina: University of Regina Press), publication in progress.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Foster, 21.
- <sup>12</sup> Foster, 5.
- <sup>13</sup> Foster, 19.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.