

A PRAIRIE VERNACULAR:

Folk & Contemporary Art Narratives of Life on the Canadian Prairies



The exhibition, *A Prairie Vernacular*, examines historic and contemporary representations of the vernacular in artistic practice on the Canadian prairies, considering the relationship of folk art to contemporary art produced in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Vernacular art is largely defined as a genre of art made by individuals untrained in the visual arts, who may not even identify themselves as artists. Artists represented in the exhibition include historic and contemporary untrained or self-taught artists, as well as academically trained artists whose works speak to the vernacular, the locality and history of the Prairie. These representations of the vernacular not only adopt the materials, methods and/or motivations of a folk aesthetic, but speak to shared contexts and subject matter, either reflecting on memories and histories of life on the prairies or presenting visual narratives rife with humour, fantasy, myth, politics, religion, and the prairie gothic. The relationship on the Prairies between folk or vernacular art and contemporary art that engages in the vernacular has been complex and, perhaps, somewhat symbiotic, stemming from a shared interest in Prairie experience, culture, environment and sensibilities as compelling sources for artistic practice.

While the emergence of vernacular art in galleries and the art market dates back to 19th century France to the symbolist work of Henri Rousseau, the significance of vernacular art in western Canada became recognized in the 1960s and 1970s by curators, contemporary artists, art dealers and collectors, who appreciated, what they considered to be, its honesty, integrity and raw expression. This interest came at a time when contemporary prairie artists were looking for an alternative to New York modernism and its universal values that had pervaded the prairies since the late 1950s. They were wanting to make work that was situated in this place, not the larger urban centres, and spoke to the world and experiences that they knew. Saskatchewan artists, who were introduced to California Funk, a ceramics movement which engaged in humour and surrealism to focus on everyday subjects, popular culture and personal narrative, felt a natural affinity with vernacular art. Its prevalence and precedence of making work about life on the Prairies provided them with a context or model to respond to their own regional experience within mainstream contemporary art. These Regina Funk artists formed relationships with many of Saskatchewan's recognized folk artists, supporting their practices by collecting their work and curating it into exhibitions, as well as collaborating with them. The exhibition examines these connections and the influence of these genres on following generations of artists, who either adopt and incorporate elements of a folk or funk aesthetic or make work that speaks to the Prairie vernacular, in regards to its realities, memories, cultural myths and visions.

Interest in vernacular art in the past has often unquestioningly overlooked the fact that this genre of artmaking usually represented pioneer or settler culture, the modernist myth of the West and white European ethnicity. The inclusion of Indigenous artists' work in the exhibition, and the writings of Indigenous art historian and curator, Dr. Carmen Robertson, to provide context for these works, allows for alternate representations of Prairie experience and histories that diversify and build on the previously prescribed concepts of vernacular art.

The layout of the exhibition, in terms of real and perceived relationships and shared thematics, allows the works to dialogue, weaving overarching, complex narratives of Prairie sensibilities and experience. It also encourages audiences to draw connections between the work of these historic and contemporary artists to not only consider the prevalence of vernacular art on the Prairies, but the impact it has had on our art, collective culture and identity as Prairie people.

FOLK, FUNK & OTHER CONNECTIONS

The early 1960s in Canada provided fertile ground for a growing interest in vernacular art by curators, contemporary artists, art dealers and the general public. This was spurred on by the national Gallery's 1960 touring exhibition, Folk Paintings of the Canadian West, the collection of vernacular art by public collections, as well as a number of national art journal articles on folk art.

In Saskatchewan, this interest gained momentum in the 1970s, with curator Wayne Morgan at the Dunlop Art Gallery in Regina organizing the first of a series of vernacular art exhibitions, and with the emergence of a younger generation of artists who wanted to move away from modernist abstraction in art and towards an art movement that celebrated popular culture and the commonplace. California Funk ceramics became the catalyst for this new prairie movement when artists Victor Cicansky, Joe Fafard and David Thauberger attended graduate and/or postgraduate studies in California. There they found support for their interest in vernacular art sources and were given the confidence to see their "own culture and historical circumstances, the prairie experience, as equal to any other for cultural investigation". While in California, Cicansky met David Gilhooly, a Funk clay artist, who eventually came to Regina to teach at the University's Fine Arts Department, alongside Cicansky, Fafard and Russell Yuristy, and a new, exciting ceramic movement was born.

With their shared inspiration in the values of Prairie experience and a history of place, the Regina Funk artists established friendships with a number of vernacular artists and began collecting their work. In 1976, Thauberger assisted with organizing an exhibition, Grassroots Saskatchewan, for the Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery, featuring the works of sixteen Saskatchewan vernacular artists. That same year, Fafard, Yuristy, Thauberger and Cicansky were commissioned by the provincial government, to collaborate with artists Frank Cicansky, Molly Lenhardt, Ann Harbuz, William McCargar, Linda Olafson, Harvey McInnes and Julianne Fafard on a project for the Montreal Olympics, The Grain Bin, a whimsical prairie diorama created out of a full-size, wooden grain bin.

The appreciation of this artistic exchange and support is evident in the portraits of Thauberger, Cicansky and the Fafard family by Molly Lenhardt. David Thauberger has been noted to create works in homage to the work of vernacular artists. His ceramic work, A Prairie Piece, references Wesley Dennis' Untitled painting of two combines in a field. His lenticular light box, Prairie Sentinel/ Winter Sentinel, depicting a grain elevator that transitions from day to night and summer to winter, is an homage to William McCargar. McCargar was known for repeatedly depicting this subject matter with the same perspective at different times of day and in different seasons. Joe Fafard created clay portraits of Harvey McInnes and Jan Wyers, vernacular artists that he was connected with and admired.

A connection between the Regina Funk artists and Winnipeg artists developed through the Grand Western Canadian Screen Shop. In 1973, Bill Lobchuk with partner Anthony Lenard, opened the screen shop to promote printmaking across the prairies. It became a major focal point for numerous professional artists, including Don Proch, David Thauberger, Vic Cicansky, Joe Fafard and Russell Yuristy, and facilitated a means for artists to experiment with different printmaking processes, such as the addition of flocking in Thauberger's Dolly & Bill.

i. Bruce Ferguson, Victor Cicansky: The Garden As Vessel, Victor Cicansky: Clay Sculpture (Regina: Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery, 1983), p.9.

Jennifer McRorie & Joanne Marion, Curators; Organized by the Moose Jaw Museum & Art Gallery and Esplanade Arts & Heritage Centre, Medicine Hat, AB, in partnership with the Art Gallery of Swift Current and Buhler Gallery, Winnipeg, MB.

Funding assistance is provided by the Government of Canada through the Canadian Heritage Museums Assistance Program, the Saskatchewan Arts Board, Saskatchewan Lotteries, SaskCulture, and the Cities of Moose Jaw and Medicine Hat.