Artist masters puppetry of the people

Miniature doppelgangers are on display

BY NANCY TOUSLEY, CALGARY HERALD   JANUARY 11, 2010

Puppets created by artist Graeme Patterson await installation in a gallery show at TrepanierBaer Gallery.
Photograph by: Gavin Young, Calgary Herald

REVIEW

Graeme Patterson: The Puppet Collective II, on view at TrepanierBaer Gallery, through Feb. 6, as part of the One Yellow Rabbit's High Performance Rodeo

Graeme Patterson has set in motion a unique take on social networking.

First, the Halifax-based artist and animator made a set of puppets based on everyday Canadians and Europeans he observed while travelling. Second, he showed them at an art gallery, but made it a condition of sale that the purchaser had to give the artist a photograph of him or herself in return. Third, he made a set of new puppets based not on randomly encountered people rendered from memory, but the specific people, rendered from photographs, who visited the gallery and bought his art.

Fourth, he is showing the new puppets at TrepanierBaer Gallery as The Puppet Collective II (2009), almost exactly one year after The Puppet Collective (2008) was presented in the same gallery. Now, getting to the crux of the experiment, he will stand back and wait to see who buys what.

All of the portrait puppets are for sale. Will collectors chose to buy their own likenesses or instead "friend" a puppet representing someone they know in the group? It is possible, of course, that they won't buy anything. Will new people join the network and give Patterson a photograph so he can make a puppet of them?

Please note the play on social collective and art collecting, which add up to a microcosm of the art

world system.

For this project to work at its best, the puppets need to get out there and circulate. He will let it continue until it runs its course.

When someone buys his or her own likeness, the puppet effectively goes out of circulation, at least for a while. The original collective contained 52 puppets, 16 of which are still available for sale under the same conditions. It is not too late to join the first group. Buyers who take advantage of the second offering will also be held to the same condition of participation.

Collective II is made up of 36 puppets. Most of them are likenesses of Calgarians — one Calgary couple who did not want their likenesses to be on puppets gave Patterson photographs of proxies — while there are nine from "away," as they say in the Maritimes. Among these are a few Nova Scotians, including members of the well-known Sobey family and Ray Cronin, director of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. It might be hard for viewers here to spot them, however.

The puppets are displayed in the gallery without the names of the people they represent attached. People who know people will probably spot their miniature doppelgangers: the best likenesses are of Paula Dozois, who teaches design at Mount Royal University, and Wayne Baerwaldt, who is the director-curator of the Illingworth Kerr Gallery at the Alberta College of Art & Design.

Patterson does not expect himself to be spot on with every likeness. The little figures are a restrictive canvas; one wrong move no matter how tiny will throw them off. It is easiest for him to do people he knows, rather than people he has seen only in their photographs. Even so, Patterson had the hardest time with his mother, Deb Patterson. He had to redo her well-coiffed head three times.

The 30-year-old artist models the heads in Sculpey and makes the bodies from wire, foam and pantyhose, which forms the outer covering or skin. The hair, clothing and accessories are fashioned from fur, feathers, cloth and bits of other materials. He works quickly, with a kind of rough DIY esthetic, and thinks of each figure as a quick sketch. He has a knack for capturing the gesture of a body and its overall gestalt, as well as an eye for the telling detail, both of which are good skills for a stop-motion animator to have.

Patterson's own likeness in a self-portrait, costumed as an adventurer, is part of the second project on view here called Taming the Wild (2008). In this work, aside from Patterson, the puppets are animals — from bear to gecko — which also appear in five, large colour photographs. Like stills from a moving picture, the photographs hang across from a shelf on which the Patterson puppet sits surrounded by the animals. The images refer to the artist's process as an animator as well as to an allegorical narrative.

This is the first work in still photography that Patterson has made, and it has the magical sense of make-believe conveyed by his enchanting films. The entire series of 12 photographs tells a story in which Patterson the animal tamer is bested by the beasts. The five photographs on view, which include one of all the animals in a stack that recalls the Brothers Grimm's tale of the Bremen Town musicians and another of the fox chasing a sheep, just about steal the show.

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