

RAY CRONIN

935 HWY 2, ELMSDALE, NS B2S 1M6 | 902.240.0766 | RAYMUNDCRONIN@GMAIL.COM | WWW.RAYCRONIN.CA

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Graeme Patterson: The Grappler

A wrestling match with ideas, with materials, with time, with the laws of physics and with our own human limits – one that is undertaken following a distinct, if idiosyncratic, set of rules – that’s as good a description of art making as any other.

Those of us for whom art is something to look at, something we come upon in a gallery or museum, do not, really cannot, know just how much struggle is involved in the successful manifestation of an idea in such recalcitrant matter as paint, wax, stone or whatever.

Pantyhose, Sculpey, rubber cement, scraps of cloth and wire, say. We don’t see the thousands of decisions that make up every painting, the hard labour of shaping metal into an intended form, the mind-numbing repetition of tiny movements that create a stop-motion animation. We know intellectually that the labour is there of course, but just as when we are faced with an athlete at the height of their abilities, part of our admiration and awe is the seeming effortlessness of their actions.

Graeme Patterson is one of those artists whose work seems effortless, existing in its own space as if it has always been. As a result, it looks familiar. When his first large-scale solo exhibition, *Woodrow*, was mounted in Halifax, it was common for visitors to “recognize” the various buildings in the installation, to feel that they *knew* the mostly fictional place that he was creating. Even visitors who had lived in the real town of Woodrow (and there were visitors to the exhibition in Halifax who had) looked at elements of the installation that were based on either wholly imaginary constructs or buildings from other places (the Church, for instance, which is based on buildings the artist saw in P.E.I.) and “remembered” them.

That's as is should be of course, especially with a practice that is so freighted with memory. In Patterson's created worlds, memory and dreams are mixed with eyes wide open, filtered through his idiosyncratic take on both popular and high culture. The objects seem familiar because they tap into something larger than simply their initial source material. If it seems as if we know them it's because, in a fundamental way, we do. Maybe it's a matter of a *Zeitgeist*, or a collective unconscious. Or maybe, and in my opinion more accurately, it's because Patterson's work, with its mixture of raw emotions, unabashed sentimentality, wit and cogent analysis, reflects something real for anyone faced with it. In *Woodrow* Patterson speaks to the process of growing up and away in a powerful and poetic manner, one that transcends the specifics of his references, and thus, seems familiar to most of us. He doesn't achieve universality, I suppose, but then, to be fair, in this polyglot world, can anyone?

Art is no longer a common language, and it hasn't been for a long time. But, for many artists and critics, there still seems to be an urge to find some sort of Rosetta stone, some Ur-language that will break through the babble of languages to arrive at something we all can comprehend. Where religion, national identity and shared social values and morality might once have provided this, or at least its illusion, the closest thing our culture has anymore to a shared symbolic language is popular culture. Neil Postman may have had us "amusing ourselves to death," but he was not wrong in his analysis. American commercial culture, "pop," is the new *lingua franca*. Uttering something interesting in this shared language is the challenge, of course, and not every artist meets it successfully. As Clement Greenberg knew, *kitsch* is too shallow to have any depth, but as some artists proved after his pronouncements, you can create depth by adding layers.

One key area of popular culture mined consistently by Patterson for his raw material is that of sport. *Woodrow*, for instance, had a hockey rink, and a hilarious game of "monkey in the middle" breaks out in the middle of a hockey game in his video *Monkey and Deer*. He's also created two other hockey-themed works in the past few years: *Hockey Organ*, which he premiered at the Toronto International Art Fair in 2007 and showed as part of

ARENA at the AGNS in the spring of 2008, and *10 Point Game*, which was shown in *Arena: Road Game* at MOCCA this past spring. Both of these works continued, in different ways, the conversation Patterson had started in *The Hockey Rink* about how spectator sports become vehicles for the creation of both collective and individual identity.

Hockey Organ pulled the viewer out of their normal state of physical passivity *vis à vis* an artwork. A combination of a cheap electronic keyboard and a tabletop rod hockey game, in this work Patterson created a musical instrument that, when played, moved the players back and forth in their slots. Each note controlled a certain action of one specific player, and, with practice, one could learn to play the organ to play the hockey game. It was commonplace during its exhibition run to see people playing each other on the keyboard. This participatory element was relatively new in Patterson's work, and it brought with it certain challenges. During the three-month run of *Arena*, for instance, Patterson was the artist-in-residence at the AGNS. It was a rare day that he didn't have to fix some element or another of *Hockey Organ*, which was constantly threatened with being loved to death by its visitors.

While on his residency at AGNS Patterson completed a new work called *10 Point Game* in which he revisited, at least formally, the hockey rink from *Woodrow*. Conceptually, however, he was into completely different territory. In *Woodrow* every building with the exception of his grandfather's workshop (which Patterson used as his studio while living in the actual town of *Woodrow*), is a ruin, reflecting the literal emptying out of so many rural towns across the prairies, and the country, and the metaphorical abandonment of growing up and leaving childhood behind. As I wrote in the catalogue to *Woodrow* about this work:

The hockey rink, though closed, still stands— a reminder of a once much more active community. *Woodrow* once boasted its own hockey team and, as is the nature of boasts, the distance between reality and memory has created a myth centred on a game between two hockey giants, played in the fateful year of 1972.

No, it is not Canada vs. Russia, but rather, Lafleche vs. Woodrow. In Patterson's *Woodrow*, the 1972 versions of the Lafleche Flyers and the Woodrow Hawks are frozen in a moment from a game that has come to represent all games, each player fixed to the ice, attached by cables to the slots that permit their movement. This is a rod-hockey game, a child's toy, transformed into an arena where modern-day gladiators wait to be activated. The "jumbotron" (because while rural rinks may not have video scoreboards, imaginary ones surely do) plays a film of the 1972 game, a compressed version of hockey à la George Roy Hill's 1977 classic *Slap Shot*. The film makes the toy aspect of this work—and in fact of all the works—most clear, in that it is the only instance where the hand of the artist is visible (literally in this case, as the artist's disembodied hand drops the puck for the face-offs in the game, and turns the knobs on the scoreboard, recording the goals for the visitors and for the home team). And, of course, in this, as in any "good ol' hockey game," someone scores and the home team wins.

10 Point Game mimics the rink from *Woodrow* in scale and in quoting a rod hockey game; it too has a video screen that plays the game referenced in its frozen tableau on the ice surface. But it is no dream, nor is it a fictionalized memory. Rather it is a depiction of an actual hockey game, one between the NHL's Toronto Maple Leafs and the Boston Bruins on February 7, 1976, at Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto, in which Leafs forward Darryl Sittler scored 10 points, an NHL record that has stood for over 30 years. A chance encounter brought Patterson in contact with Sittler, and the retired NHL star was so taken with the young artist that he agreed to be let Patterson tape him telling his story (which, of course, he has told thousands of times). Patterson took this narrative and created a short, stop-motion animation that plays on the video screen in his stripped down version of the Gardens. Sittler's voice narrates the movie, and the combination of his earnest, yet somehow weary delivery, and Patterson's quirky take on the descriptions, is, quite simply, charming and compelling. Sittler's feat is one of those moments where an athlete transcends their sport and their own limitations, something that may never be replicated. Watching the grainy video of the game available on You-tube Sittler's efforts seem effortless – seamless passes, sure shots, and lucky bounces that just seem as if this was ordained to

happen. Of course no one is born that good, and in sport, as in art or anything else, effortlessness is only achieved after much effort. Patterson knows that full well. While he was living on the family homestead in Woodrow he spent a winter practicing on a frozen pond on the farm. He bought a hockey net, a stick and gloves and spent hours practicing slap shots, wrist shots, backhanded shots: he knows how difficult Sittler's effortless was to pull off. Thanks to his video we do too – whatever our knowledge of the game. In the animated version of *10 Point Game* Patterson sets up each scoring play with a background scene, with a lone player, on the ice, practicing. Goals are made, luck is manufactured, even bounces are more about intent than luck. That simple trope, that luck is earned, is something that we can never see in the game, and is the linchpin that holds this wonderful work together, and that pulls it up out of simply being some sort of fan's paean to a faded hockey great.

Hockey isn't the only sport that comes in up in Patterson's oeuvre, either. *Woodrow* featured animations of bowling and a game of horseshoes, played by each set of Patterson's grandparents (in the basements of the Church and the House respectively). Patterson actually joined a bowling league in nearby Lafleche while living in Woodrow, playing every week with his maternal grandparents and their friends. In his first "puppet collective" exhibition at the commercial gallery Trépanier Baer last January, one of the figures was a corpulent Saskatchewan Roughriders fan sporting a hat made from a case for Pilsner lager, a local beer on the Prairies. Anyone who watched the 2009 Grey Cup will have seen fans in just that head-gear. The second version of the exhibition, which opened January 8, also at Trépanier Baer in Calgary, features puppets decked out for surfing, mountain-climbing, running and, yes, in hockey gear.

Hockey remains a touchstone for Patterson, and he embraces it with all the fervour of a convert: he didn't play organized hockey as a child, didn't really play ice hockey at all (he does now, playing men's "beer league" hockey in Halifax), and he didn't pick an NHL team to root for until he was attending the Dundas Valley school of art in his late teens. Interestingly, he became, and remains, an ardent Buffalo Sabres fan. He grew up a diehard Roughriders' fan, but who in Saskatchewan didn't? The sport that he did compete in was free-style wrestling, which is a very popular sport for high schools in Saskatchewan (Patterson grew up in Saskatoon).

For his newest body of work Patterson is returning to his childhood, creating a series of video/sculptures based on bunk beds, that mainstay of the suburban boy's bedroom. In this projected work, rivaling *Woodrow* in scope, it is Patterson's intention to re-imagine a childhood friendship with a Japanese neighbor named Yuki. The boy in question returned to Japan when he and Patterson were 9, but for three or four years before that they were best friends. Part of this project will be an attempt by Patterson to find this long-lost friend, and to make a series of sculptures and animations that deal with friendship, cultural and personal identity, and memory and nostalgia. It's too early to project just where this project will go, but with the creation of *Grudge Match* for the 2009 Sobey Art Award exhibition (he was the Atlantic Canada nominee on that year's shortlist), Patterson has given us a good first look at this new series.

Grudge Match is based on the framework of an oversize set of bunk beds, approximately twice actual size. The top bunk has a mattress on it, while the bottom bunk holds a re-creation of Patterson's High School gym. Two figures sit at opposite corners of a wrestling mat, each wearing singlets and seemingly preparing for a bout. One is a representation of the artist at his current age; the other is Patterson's imagining of what his long-lost friend Yuki would look like today. A video is projected onto the wall opposite from a projector built into the "beds." The stop motion animation depicts a wrestling match between the two figures, animated within the bunk bed set. Patterson's mastery of the stop-motion technique is here on full display, with a truly remarkable series of wrestling holds and take-downs. The set is further embellished by the addition of rooms in "drawers" built into the lower bunk, two of which are pulled out and show the shower room, the weight room and the coach's office. The corners of the upper bunk are adorned with the discarded costumes of two mascots (animated photographs of each mascot dancing are part of the gym set), one for each wrestling team: a Bison for the blue team represented by Patterson's doppelganger, and a Cougar for the yellow, represented by the Yuki puppet.

As with so much of his work, this piece is replete with humour, with nostalgia, with a certain understated frisson of adolescent sexuality. Patterson's sure touch keeps the work from descending into kitsch or farce, but nevertheless doesn't flinch from the ridiculous elements suggested by the many details of the work. This marvelous sculpture will be part of Patterson's upcoming exhibition this spring at the Rodman Hall Art Centre.

Sport as content for art seems logical, and it is in fact very common – just look at any sports memorabilia website. But cutting edge art, contemporary visual art, high art as the Moderns used to say, that's an area that until recently has been pretty much sport-free.

Art and sport have obvious parallels, and equally obvious disparities. Sport is primarily about physical excellence, about pushing, and even overcoming, the limitations of our all too human bodies. It is a kind of thinking that is preformed not in words but in deeds. It is articulated in action, and it is the actions themselves that are its statement. Art, at least visual art, is also a form of articulation in action, but it is not the actions that carry meaning but the results, the residue. This is thinking in objects then, and the objects are the result of deeds.

An underappreciated parallel is that of competition – sport is obviously competitive, art less so, but anyone who underestimates the competitive drive of artists is missing the point. In 2004 Jean Pierre Gauthier made two new pieces for the Sobey Art Award exhibition, each dealt with competition, with winners and losers, in their own way. Patterson, too, made a new work for the Sobey in 2009, and *Grudge Match* certainly acknowledged the competitive situation of its premiere.

Art is a conversation, with history, with one's peers, with oneself. To be excellent it also should be a competition. Without striving to surpass the art that has preceded oneself, an artist simply mimics what has come before. Far from being a conversation (and above all one that others find interesting) art in this scenario is mere parroting. That danger is one that Graeme Patterson constantly skirts, going near the edge, playfully pushing the limits, without ever missing his sure-footed grasp on his magical art. Patterson approaches his art with all the seriousness of an Olympian, or of a professional athlete. This is serious play, and one thing is certain: he's playing to win.

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