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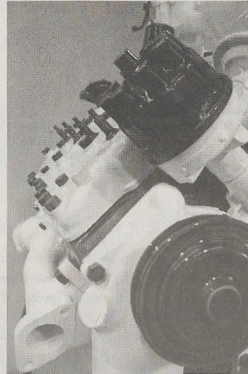
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## Seen: Art



Yuka Yamaguchi *Rendezvous*  
Colour pencils on paper 2008



Clint Neufeld *Ten Thousandths Over (Detail)*  
Ceramic and glaze 2008

# Vast Prairie, Vast Exhibit

Flatlanders a slightly uneven  
but highly significant success  
by Bart Gazzola

**FLATLANDERS**  
Runs to January 4  
Mendel Art Gallery

*Flatlanders* is an uneven exhibit, but I don't mean that in a critical way — especially considering how many artists are represented here. Indeed, with the exception of perhaps two artists (out of eighteen), everyone involved is relevant. In an exhibition this wide (one which fills more than two of the Mendel's galleries), we need to begin somewhere — so let's examine the curator's statement:

*Flatlanders* is an exciting survey of some of the stunning and provocative contemporary art produced by emerging Saskatchewan artists in the last few years. The title indicates a recurring theme in the work of prairie artists: that of the vast space that literally surrounds us. However, space is also regarded metaphorically as that which is limitless or which imposes limits, so the conceptual and curatorial parameters of the exhibition consider not only our relationship to physical place, but also to the social spaces of memory, anxiety, history, spirituality, technology, ecology, and identity.

Now, that may sound like *Flatlanders* is all over the "place" (I'll try to restrain my puns), and in some ways it is, but this is a good thing. There are many themes that run through this show, and through the works of the artists presented — and some of the works presented here are excerpts, or tastes, of larger works presented elsewhere.

In her facilitation of the artist salon, Jen Budney framed the discussion with the parameters of place and placelessness, spirit and matter, and technology and ecology. I would expand upon that very useful approach, and add race and gender, rural and urban, and the present and the past. It is heartening to see the Mendel display so many quality young artists who make work that is so intensely relevant to this place, so considered, and so engaged with community — and who take their work,

but not always themselves, seriously.

There are some familiar names here, and some that perhaps are not. Yuka Yamaguchi displays some new delightful works, declaring in the artist salon that "I make images just to amuse myself," while Seema Goel's interactive installation is within her framework of "cultural distortion." But I knew I could count on several of the sculptors to describe their artistic works most succinctly, whether it be Chris Gardiner declaring that he "collects anxieties," Clint Neufeld's simplistic assertion that "I make useless objects," Stacia Verigin's almost embarrassed admission of how she "makes messes and tries to clean them up," or (my personal favourite) Marc Courtemanche stating that he has a "perverse way of using materials."

Several of these are worth elaborating upon — such as Neufeld's engine that is made of ceramics, a perfect (if not workable) replica of a symbol of masculinity in very proper and genteel blues and whites, a likeness that my Italian grandmother would have proudly displayed among her plate collection. Neufeld's work plays with the very male idea of tinkering with an engine, and yet the laborious, "horrible" work is so delicate and fragile that one can't help but see the feminization of this object. There is irony here (this is the Prairies, after all), as there is in Courtemanche constructing banal tools (i.e. hammers) from clay or other materials to expose the craftsmanship inherent in their construction, or Verigin's objects that are constructed from sawdust and glue, and whose origins are exposed (like the rings of a tree that is cut down) only when "opened." Neufeld's work is significant on another level of both rural/urban discourse, and the universality of Art to both spaces.

There is a significant First Nations component here, as there should be: Wally Dion, Michelle Lavallee, Joi Arcand, and a favourite of mine, Gabriel Yahyahkeekoot, are represented. Dion presents defensive accessories on a mannequin, "guarding" his mural-like

drawing on the wall. He spoke of technology as a metaphor for empowerment within the Native community, so his sculptural use of circuit boards as a shield illustrates this in a literal manner. Dion was eloquent at the aforementioned salon when the issue of spirit and matter was discussed: the idea that "faith without works" is irrelevant, and that one must stay here and act in your spirit, in a participatory manner that acknowledges the responsibility of the artist in relation to the community.

It's a central idea to Dion's work, and one can surmise that it is also central to Joi Arcand's images, which explore her individual history in this place, or her father's, in a manner that makes the personal truly political. In this same vein, I also greatly enjoy Michelle Lavallee's installation, with the Hudson Bay blankets: objects as historical markers define this work (Lavallee is curator at the Dunlop in Regina, so negotiating historical spaces — with multiple and conflicting histories — is a concern), but I also see a legacy of death, thinking of blankets and smallpox, in boxes about to be sent, with books on top that suggest a story to be read — or ignored.

There are less successful works in *Flatlanders*: I have a feather-light criticism of Zachari Logan's works, which continue his efforts in self-portraiture that explores the queering of his identity, in Saskatchewan. I want it to be more pornographic, more "in my face," more assertive and less "arty." It's been several decades since Attila Lukacs painted his donkey-headed men, slightly larger than life (still real, but believably "monstrous") with erect penises coming out at you (oops — but that was my best pun, so far), like protruding weapons. Logan is a brilliant technician, and his ideas need to match his ability. But his take on Guido Reni's "St. Sebastian" is sexy — and he's one of the more "emerging" of the *Flatlanders*.

In such a large show and with such a loose definition of "emerging," there are some absences: Meghan Krauss, Rowan Pantel, or Bruce Montcombroux. Although Montcombroux's drawings are derivative of the Royal Art Lodge of Winnipeg, they are still significantly more relevant than the rehabbed abstract expressionism of Nancy Lowry. I spoke at the beginning about how only two artists lower the general quality of *Flatlanders*: Kiyoko Kato and Nancy Lowry are these two, since one is not engaging, and the other is frankly inexplicable in light of the use of the words "provocative" or "contemporary."

Kato's work is abstract, and there is an intuition to her practice that isn't easily expressed in words. Her works read somewhat as topographies, or as though you are seeing the prairies from above. These are "nice" works, but they suffer when compared to other flatlanders.

Lowry's work, however, attempts to produce the works of a previous generation as one's own, and pass them off as contemporary. I say "produce," as this is not art — although this type of work always sells, as irrelevance dressed up as art looks good on a corporate wall. I also say "produced" as it's more about imitating a previous generation's work, ideas and egotism: it is neither contemporary, nor relevant.

But this is the only place where Budney and Dan Ring stumble: and perhaps it's like the Perchudoff in a collections show, acting more as a warning that one only glorifies the past when the future dries up. Mainly, it is the works of Henderson, Semko, Yahyahkeekoot, Atkins and others which make *Flatlanders* one of the most significant exhibitions of the year. ☪