



## Model community

**Saskatchewan-based artist Graeme Patterson has put the spotlight on a dying tradition, in a way that is both haunting and whimsical, with an exhibition now on in Halifax.** By Erin Donnelly

The family farm is becoming a dying tradition all across Canada, as multinational corporations take over more and more of the market share. This has left independent farmers scrambling for other means to make a living and, too often, having to move away from the small communities where their families lived for generations. The result is a scattering of deserted farm communities across the country, communities that, though small, once thrived, and are now little more than ghost towns.

Saskatoon-bred artist Graeme Patterson was inspired by this sad phenomenon to create a multi-media installation that has just opened at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. Woodrow combines sculptural elements with stop-motion animation and animatronics to create a uniquely Canadian exhibition that is both whimsical and haunting.

Patterson started work on the animated elements of the show while studying at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, but needed more space to finish the models. So he moved to the actual town of Woodrow, Sask., and set up a studio in his grandfather's old shop, on the abandoned family homestead.

"I moved out there and cleaned out about half of the old shop. It wasn't the original shop, it had been rebuilt after a fire. My grandfather was kind of the town fix-it guy, so when the shop burned, the community rebuilt it for him," Patterson explains. The tight-knit community had once been home to about 250 people. While Patterson was there, rebuilding the key architectural elements of the town at 1:10 scale, the population was less than 10.

The show is comprised of nine main pieces depicting significant components of the town, both real and fictional, with each conveying a different feeling. In the miniature Woodrow, the shop is used to represent time, with one side showing the old machine shop as it once was with a tiny

mechanical milling machine and lathe, and the other showing Patterson's studio as the models were in progress, with each of the works represented.

The grain elevator embodies the life of the town, both its beginning and end, while the church represents hope. Motion sensors activate an animatronic organ player. The hockey arena illustrates a sense of community, with the jumbotron showing the Woodrow Hawks throw down against the Lafleche Flyers (circa 1972) on a table hockey game in stop-motion animation.

The house conveys a feeling of sadness, overrun with a variety of animated and animatronic pests. A motion-activated herd of deer represent the unchanged presence of nature. A set of grain bins shows both the past and future of the farming industry, with animations on small LCD screens in three of the four bins. And finally, a "pothole" also symbolizes time, as well as the material history of farm life, with a variety of farm equipment, building pieces and vehicles, sliding off the road and into the ground.

"A lot of what's in the pothole is actually 'junk' left over from creating the animations," Patterson mentions. The sculptural road on the pothole model meets an old gravel road in a looped video of a prairie vista, projected on the wall behind. The exhibition is set up according to roles in the town, with the grain elevator, church and hockey arena at the heart of the community. The house, shop and barn are on the edges, representing family and individual life.

Woodrow is on view at AGNS in Halifax to April 9, and will then move on to the Montreal Biennale from May through July, and the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon in September. □

Above\_Animatronic organ player within the church model. Above right\_Model of Woodrow's grain elevator at 1:10 scale.