

Graeme Patterson

Lament for a Hamlet: The Intermedia Sculpture of *Woodrow*

Mendel Art Gallery Associate Curator, Dan Ring, has written a wonderful catalogue essay that examines the short animation *Monkey and Deer*, by Woodrow, Saskatchewan-based artist Graeme Patterson. Ring introduces *Monkey and Deer* as an artwork linked to one of nine intermedia sculptural installations entitled *Woodrow*. Each component part is integrated into a set of scale model, iconic buildings representing parts of an existing and imaginary hamlet. Populated by animated human and animal figures, it is offered as a quirky profile of a quintessential prairie hamlet. Produced by Patterson between 2003 and 2006, *Woodrow* combines digital animations on compact monitors with original soundtracks and mixed media sculpture. Collectively, *Woodrow* is a thematic framework within which to consider the notion of sentimentality as an operating system that is both imagined and projected. Sentimentality has a unique application in Patterson's work which, while situating and containing the maudlin and romantic qualities of the sentimental, ultimately avoids undue emotion.

Patterson's romantic animation focuses on two stop-motion figures: one a wily monkey and the other a lone, scruffy deer. The two animals are inexplicably linked in their lead roles as the only wildlife on an otherwise destitute patch of prairie near a falling down grain elevator. Maintained by the sole human, a grandfather figure, *The Grain Elevator* appears to be an open container or refuge for this unlikely combination of wildlife. The monkey is typically represented in art as an exotic, mischievous character, a meddling go-between of the organ grinder, while the deer is a symbol of agility and grace. In the animation, the deer strays into *The Grain Elevator's* adjoining yard, drawing the curious monkey down from his elevated perch. The deer frolics with the monkey (and his makeshift crown), wildly running in and out of the iconic buildings of *Woodrow*, and ultimately repelling the monkey's playful advances. In the final seconds of the animation the monkey lies broken and dazed on the ground. The deer reconciles with him, scooping the mildly scurrilous monkey up in his antlers and running off into the distance. Patterson's mournful, schmaltzy soundtrack provides a touching aural backdrop for the unlikely pair.

Ring's essay assesses the sentimentality in *Monkey and Deer* as unique and possibly socio-economically informed—and far from a debased sentimentality that can otherwise render great art naïve and uninformed. Ring finds the interaction of deer and monkey is both elegiac and futuristic, highlighting a more elaborate endgame anchored to Canada's role in the collapse of the British Empire. The mythic British motherland that once evoked in Canadian pioneers a Victorian sense of hope amidst a fledgling and harsh rural landscape is no longer relevant. Owing to the overwhelming economic hardships of maintaining a prairie grain farm, the sun has finally set on the Empire's breadbasket.

Other notions of sentimentality run deep through the component parts of *Woodrow*, and become essential to the reading of its moving images, sounds and three-dimensional forms. Patterson approaches sentimentality as if it were an elixir or glue—a wistful

comfort food that is firmly grounded in contemporary art's fixation with childhood toys. Patterson's construction of sentimentality is located in utilitarian farm culture, but for most viewers, sentimentality is first and foremost recognizable from a past, shared experience of cinematic spectacle that built a circumscribed meaning to ranch and farm culture. Hollywood narratives, the dominant form of cinematic spectacle, are grounded in either a subjective perspective or institutionalized tale of farm or ranch culture that rarely privileges quirky, animated creatures, grandparents who casually bowl, and decrepit hamlet buildings. Cinematic spectacles of farm culture achieve a sentimentality specific to subject matter that evolves around the imprints of its own apparatus left as a sign, marker or memory. Patterson's checklist of buildings-as-sculptures are another form of marker, highly specific in their roles: *The Barn*, *The Grain Elevator*, *The Church*, *The Hockey Arena*, *The Shop*, *The House*, *The Grain Bins*, and *The Sand Pit/Pothole*. They are effective titles as stage sets for drama, recognizable sites of community activity and deposits of detritus in the quickly disintegrating agricultural hamlet of Woodrow.

Despite the sentimental notions of what small rural prairie settlements once stood for (i.e., independence, hardy self-sufficiency, cultural and entertainment gathering places, the Empire's breadbasket, and so forth), Patterson, the master craftsman and miniaturist, relocates sentimentality in the shaping and presentation of his building materials and the development of his animated characters. Patterson's modulation of sentimentality—in his various sculpted forms, animated characters and broken narratives—is infused with wit, humour and provocative flashes of insight into a fading way of life. Via a strategy of re-reading and re-writing aspects of that way of life (both realistic and fantastical) in intimate detail, Patterson also asks the viewer to accept an expansive spatial arrangement in traditional and contemporary media, built on a vision of cinematic spectacle but intent on producing an alternate, more culturally specific construction of the sentimental.

Patterson's animated figures are constructed with a tenuous amalgam of modelling materials and provide us with clues to reading Patterson's particular approach to the spectacle of the sentimental. The figures are handmade and retain a feeble, unstable presence. But what cements their larger-than-life presence are their idiosyncratic features, from the facial scars on the hockey players to the loping gait of the grandfather figure. The figures are each given a sentimental depth, despite their makeshift construction. Each figure features a structural support system of light metal and fleshy, rubber compounds that barely contains their imminent unravelling. The eyeballs and appendages of hockey player and monkey alike hang from their bodies, but just barely. Individually and collectively Patterson's silent figures introduce viewers to the characters that sustain the spirit of the hamlet. One meets seniors playing lonely games of horseshoes or bowling awkwardly. An elderly farmer rides a tractor lawnmower, accesses the internet in his underwear or climbs up and down ladders, whiling away the hours. Abandoned farm animals rummage through a dilapidated church, while *Slapshot*-era hockey players fight and out-manoeuvre one another on the ice, to the bitter, glorious end. All of Patterson's animated characters in *Woodrow*, with their unfinished, hand-crafted appearances, offer a particular counterbalance to an overindulgent form of Hollywood cinema's production of sentimentality.

While Patterson moves viewers through animated time and its corresponding emotional highs and lows, something else informs the sculptural forms. There is a measured pace to the unfolding of Patterson's sculptures that plays a role in transforming the *Woodrow* installation into a morality tale of singular prescience. The nine scale models achieve near-iconic status as highly recognizable forms representing the social and economic fabric of a community. Their commonality seduces us twice over, as both nostalgic homage and gross, hand-rendered articulation of form in the present. One can't help but stare at the miniature, three-dimensional forms for their gestural attributes that move viewers so easily beyond the recognizable. Patterson's iconic buildings are simply beguiling in their construction. Their simple construction out of common poster board, Mylar, paint and/or felt pen render thinly disguised forms, utterly effective in their allusion to the ubiquitous built cultural landscape in Canada. But again, they are beyond mere models. The simple materials of the set designer are transformed in Patterson's sculptures to create recognizable volumes—elegant, minimalist statements; forms stripped to their bare essentials, ravaged further by age and abuse, and apparently on the verge of extinction.

Depicted are the remnants: a very detailed sculpture and remembrances of a highly structured way of life. Parody and redundancy make for a kind of cinema of distractions of Patterson's own making. On-view is a level of cultural dissipation that lends its obvious form, in the recreation of the iconic elements of a hamlet, a brutal presence. . It is as if a recycling of memory cannot be disentangled from the replaying of a history doomed to repeat itself on a digital loop.

The following quotations operate on several levels in the context of this essay. First, they might act as a composite of gravestone epitaphs for *Woodrow's* missing graveyard. Each transcription acts as a eulogy, reflecting spatially, philosophically, and historically on a conceptual or natural landscape. The quotations speak to Patterson's gut feeling that the cultural air is being sucked out of the rural landscape of Woodrow, and that the associated sense of loss is omnipresent. The resulting sculptural forms as homage are obvious. The far ranging quotations operate as grave markers that refocus the sentimental as an artful strategy in Patterson's art-making, essential to the multiple narrative perspectives within an abstract system, formally presented in the same diffused and fragmentary way in which Patterson's *Woodrow* is experienced.

We begin to feel the horror of the plains and their attraction, a tension perhaps that the map-making mind can bring under control. For if the horizontal is open in all directions, the place where all futures are possible, then it is also the focus of annihilation, the inescapable point of no return... This is the double aspect of the plain: that it releases, but releases into nothingness.

Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

What usually remains intact in the epochs of petrification and aforesaid doom is the faculty of freedom itself, the sheer capacity to begin, which animates and inspires all

human activities and is the hidden source of production of all great and beautiful things.  
Hannah Arendt, What is Freedom (Penguin, 2000).

A sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror.  
Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

There is no real “I”, no permanent self or ego. The ego to which one is so devoted is an illusion created by the combination of mental and physical processes in constant flux. Having explored body and mind to the deepest level, one sees that there is no hardcore, no essence that remains independent of the processes, nothing that is exempt from the law of impermanence. There is only an impersonal phenomena changing beyond one’s control.

S.N. Goenka, The Art of Living (San Francisco: Harpers, 1991).

For the early Heidegger, death is something to be achieved, it is the fundamental that permits us to get the totality of existence and hence authenticity, into our grasp – the possibility of the impossibility.

Simon Critchley, Very Little... Almost Nothing (Routledge, 1997).

I shall have to speak of things, of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter.

Samuel Beckett, Endgame (Grove Press, 1958).

The world is all too easily stuffed with meaning and we risk suffocating under the combined weight of competing narratives of redemption – whether religious, socio-economic, scientific, technological, political, aesthetic or philosophical... The recognition of the meaningless as an achievement leads to a deeper recognition of the profound limitedness of the human condition, of our frailty and separateness from one another.

Simon Critchley, Very Little... Almost Nothing (Routledge, 1997).

As your insight into the ultimate nature of reality is deepened and enhanced, you will develop a perception of reality from which you will perceive phenomena and events as sort of illusory, illusion-like, and this mode of perceiving reality will permeate all your interactions with reality... Even emptiness itself, which is seen as the ultimate nature of reality, is not absolute, nor does it exist independently. We cannot conceive of emptiness as independent of a basis of phenomena, because when we examine the nature of reality, we find that it is empty of inherent existence. Then if we are to take that emptiness itself is an object and look for its essence, again we will find that it is empty of inherent existence...

14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama

“I don’t really know about ghosts”, she was saying; “but I do know that our souls can be made to go outside our bodies when we’re alive”...

“What - really now? And is it so maiddy?” he said

“A very easy way to feel ‘em go”, continued Tess, “is to lie on the grass at night and look straight up at some big bright star; and by fixing your mind upon it, you will soon find that you are hundreds and hundreds o’ miles away from your body, which you don’t seem to want at all”

Thomas Hardy, Tess of the D’Urbervilles (Penguin, 1891).

The imagined epitaphs collected as quotations by Clodagh Emoe and redirected by this writer, are proposed as an extension of my observations of *Woodrow*. The markers are symbolically interpreted as the tension of anticipation, perhaps to delay the dissolution of *Woodrow* itself, further paralyzing the hamlet and the poignant portrait of a community that Patterson has created. But of course the grave markers are not necessary. Patterson’s installation is, in its totality, the most sensitive marker. Patterson’s stop-motion animations and hand-crafted sculptures accurately reflect *Woodrow*’s pathos by maintaining a subtle and inspired humour for a devastated family farm culture in rural, southwestern Saskatchewan. *Woodrow* is produced as a homage to a unique culture that hasn’t vanished altogether. Some hallowed-out prairie souls are aging on the rolling plains, hanging on to the last vestiges of a way of life—some turn to crop dusting in their hand-built airplanes, others commute to urban jobs in nearby cities like Saskatoon, Joni Mitchell’s fairweather hide-away.

Wayne Baerwaldt, 2006

Thanks to Graeme Patterson, Clodagh Emoe, Johanne Sloan, Dan Ring, Ray Cronin and Meredith Dault