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ARTIST TO WATCH

Small town requiem

A Saskatchewan artist has a country-wide hit with an exhibit that puts a gothic twist on a dying town

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SHAUNA REMPEL
TORONTO STAR

Woodrow: population 15, is so small most people who live in Saskatchewan would have trouble locating it. But Graeme Patterson has put Woodrow on the map with a sculptural installation inspired by the shrinking village.

Woodrow, south of Moose Jaw and not much else, is where Patterson, 26, spent his childhood summers and where his great-grandfather first farmed. Today it's where the multimedia artist creates the puppets and models based on the town, that he then animates to music, which he also composes himself.







The gothic exhibit comes complete with a grain elevator, a hockey team and a church. It's become a hit: Woodrow will be touring the country for at least the next two years, so even if you can't find it on a map, there's a good chance Patterson's version of the village will come to you.

It's currently in Nova Scotia, but will come to Montreal this spring and is expected to hit Toronto in 2008. The National Gallery in Ottawa is also getting a piece of Woodrow: It bought Patterson's



TIM KROCHAK FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Paradoxically, it was while studying in Toronto that artist Graeme Patterson realized he wanted to develop his connection with rural life. Above, the rink in "Woodrow."

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11-foot tall grain elevator sculpture, making him the youngest artist to ever sell to the gallery. If you don't want to wait until it shows up, you can go on a guided tour of "Woodrow" at graemepatterson.com.

"When I get excited I need the time and the space to be able to do something big," Patterson says, speaking from the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, where "Woodrow" is on display until April 9. "And I need to be alone. That's why I don't like city life, I feel I can never get any work done because I'm social."

Patterson's work is like a diorama you made in elementary school, only on a much larger and spookier scale, with music and video thrown in for extra credit. The "town" of Woodrow is about as stereotypically Prairies as you can get. There's a ramshackle farmhouse, a hockey rink and, of course, the once-iconic grain elevator.

The sculptures sit on stands and people can peer in to see videos of stop-motion animation using puppets – some of which are modelled on his relatives.

You can watch his grandparents playing horseshoes at the house, while at the grain silos, two guys patterned after Patterson's uncles play capture the flag (the "flag" being what's known in Saskatchewan as *gitch* – or old-school for underwear, which in this case, is the kind with white striping).

The nine-piece installation takes up a massive 2,000 square feet. The 7-foot high hockey rink, roof peeled back to reveal '70s-era players from Woodrow duking it out with the team from rival town Lafleche, looks like a tabletop hockey game for giants. "They're very big miniatures," agrees Patterson.

"Woodrow" is based on Patterson's own family and memories, but people from Halifax and elsewhere see their own history in his ghost town.

"The show is not just about Woodrow. It's about all small towns and communities across Canada," he says. "Some people have given me their life story, about their small town, all that, just from seeing the work." Patterson has done what many young adults do – he went back to his roots. And he discovered some home truths: that things change no matter what, but that it's possible to look at the past with joy as well as sadness.

The result, as curator Ray Cronin puts it, is a series of overlapping "worlds within worlds." The shop's garage door lifts to reveal a video of power tools running by themselves, an homage to Patterson's grandfather, whose 2004 death prompted Patterson's return to Woodrow. Also lying around the shop are half-finished mini-models of the exhibition, as though the viewer has gone back in time to see the work in progress.

Patterson, who grew up in Saskatoon, says his interest in rural Canada was likely influenced by time spent earning an Ontario Foundation in Visual Arts Diploma at the Dundas Valley School of Art when he was 18. "It was the first time I lived outside of Saskatchewan, one of the first times I lived away. And so I had

Saskatchewan: Finally as cool as Newfoundland

Multimedia artist **Graeme Patterson** doesn't have a lock on small town Saskatchewan. From TV shows like *Corner Gas* and *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, everyone is fascinated by the rectangle province. With the Junos coming to Saskatoon on April 1, the province will enjoy even more attention.

It just might be that Saskatchewan is the new Newfoundland. The Eastern province enjoyed a brush with coolness in the 1990s thanks to hits such as *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* and the band Great Big Sea. Consider the similarities: both provinces lose workers to Alberta and have struggling economies based on a single industry (farming in Saskatchewan, fishing in Newfoundland). Both have names that are difficult for people from away to pronounce. Residents such as Saskatchewan's **Brent Butt** and Newfoundland's **Shaun Majumder** have made their mark making fun of the provinces.

Even though Saskatchewan residents don't have a distinct accent like Newfies, there are still words unique to the province such as *bunnyhug* (known as a hoodie in the rest of the world) and *frajolaki* (essentially souvlaki on a bun). See also, *gitch*, in the main story.

And unlike Newfoundland, which emphasises LAND at the end, it's pronounced sus-KATCH-uh-won – and

that feeling of separation and living alone. And it was the first time I experienced big city life when I visited Toronto," he said. "Perhaps some of these ideas for this work initially came from that time and space."

It was also his introduction to the world of art. "I didn't even know what the Group of Seven was," he says. "I was originally interested in just doing animation, Disney-type animation. I went to the AGO and the other big galleries for the first time and saw installation. I saw a George Bures Miller piece that first year which really got me thinking about robotics and installation art with a real dramatic, theatrical thing going on."

Patterson had another Toronto experience in 2005 when he did a residency at the Drake Hotel and showed the "Woodrow" animations as part of the Toronto International Film Festival.

"It was a completely different world. Every day felt like two days there. As opposed to Woodrow, things are pretty slow. You know the way the day's going to go, you can plan it out, to the minute. Whereas in Toronto I had to finally break down and buy a cellphone."

For his next project, inspired by hours spent in visiting his grandmother in the Lafleche nursing home, Patterson plans to recreate the facility and its inhabitants, with a theme of aging. As with "Woodrow" he will include a representation of himself. In "Woodrow" he shows up as a monkey, clearly an outsider, who rides into town on a deer.

In the new piece Patterson says he will also look noticeably different from those around him, as he records himself against a green screen and then edits the video into scenes with the animated puppets populating the nursing home sculpture.

With those plans in mind, his future remains near Woodrow. "I'll be out at the farm, and that will be my space, and then I will travel from there. That seems to be the only way I can do my work."

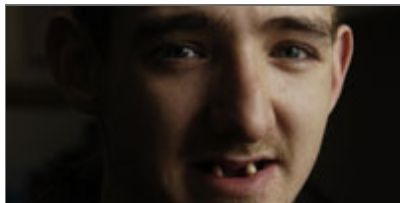
definitely not WON. Plus, if you're going to pass for local, you must say the word as one syllable.

- *Shauna Rempel*

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