

Welcome to Woodrow...

...a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which various aspects of a city may embody – if imaginatively conceived – any city, all the details of which may be made to voice his most intimate convictions.

– William Carlos Williams

The village of Woodrow, Saskatchewan, the inspiration for Graeme Patterson's sculptural installation, is hardly a city. Nor is its doppelganger, though *Woodrow* is certainly that imaginatively conceived construction of a life envisioned by the American poet William Carlos Williams. Williams, dear to sculptors for his famous tenet, "no ideas but in things," is known as one of the leading modernist poets of the 20th century. In a long poem that served as both a self-portrait and an imaginative recreation of his world, Williams described a universe not in a grain of sand, but in a small industrial city on the banks of the Passaic River: Paterson, New Jersey. Of course Williams's idea of things ran to poetic images, but his firmly held belief that the only idea worth having about art is the work of art itself, is compelling, and for the critic and curator, daunting. Critics attempting to be poets (or artists) by using artworks as props for their own thinking were often his targets. I would not want to be accused of taking such liberties with the work of Graeme Patterson, so I will take Williams's warnings to heart. What follows, then, is not an attempt to mine Woodrow for ideas, nor is it an effort to use Patterson's work to illustrate my own constructions. Rather, let's think of this as a tour or as a voyage of discovery—and an opportunity to examine some very specific, though undoubtedly fanciful, things.

Woodrow is not a complete city. It is, instead, a ruin—a ghost town seemingly inhabited only by animals—though each building appears to retain the spirit and memories of its former inhabitants. The sculptures, with one exception, have videos of stop-motion animation built into them, providing the work's ghostly or remembered aspects. The real Woodrow, however, is not yet a ghost town, though it too has built-in elements of memory. One of the first things you see driving into the village is a steel tower holding a bronze bell – a monument to the lost school-house, almost sculptural. It

is a bell-tower attached to nothing, and was built, not surprisingly, by Patterson's grandfather, Woodrow's former all-purpose machinist, metal worker and general "fix-it" man.

Patterson's constructed world is linked across and through its sculptures, animations and the overall form of the installation: the town is the context for the animations and the sculptures, the buildings serve as sets for the animations, the animation is an integral part of the sculpture, and the long animation *Monkey and Deer* contains the town as the sets, and setting, for its action.

The Grain Elevator

The centerpiece of both Woodrows – Patterson's and Saskatchewan's – is perhaps the most enduring icon of Canadian prairie life: a grain elevator. The real Woodrow (with a population of about ten) has two elevators, one old and disused, and one still in use, though no longer sporting the famous logo of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. In Patterson's *Woodrow*, the grain elevator is a half-ruined, virtually empty shell. It serves, in part, as the screen upon which his short film *Monkey and Deer* (the lynchpin of this exhibition) plays.

The ghost in this particular machine is the figure of a care-taker, an elderly man who seems to be working on maintaining the elevator, and who, after making a short appearance at the beginning of *Monkey and Deer*, then disappears from the narrative. The figure, a portrait of Patterson's grandfather, climbs a ladder into the elevator and is never seen again. He is, however, replaced by another portrait (of sorts), this one a self-portrait – the recurring figure of the monkey, a character that the artist has identified as partial self-portrait.

The centrality of the elevator to Patterson's imaginative world is made clear by the fact that its video component is the one that reveals the most about the town – so it too is a tour of Woodrow. The town could withstand losing its school, and has weathered losing its arena and most of its population, but for a farming village on the Canadian prairies, losing the elevator is akin to losing the town. *Woodrow* has three main built components: the town, the homestead, and the areas that occupy the limits of the town,

the outskirts. The other two sites in the town of Woodrow, at least in Patterson's version, are the hockey arena and the church (in the real town, the arena is closed – it had horses in it the first time I saw it – and there is more than one church). As with the elevator, these buildings represent both institutions and personalities.

The Hockey Rink

Normally in rural communities there are four pillars of communal life – places of work, worship, education and recreation. In Woodrow, however, only three are represented because the town's school was lost long before Graeme Patterson came to know it. 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 around 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.

The Church

Churches occupy a unique role in rural life, providing spiritual as well as temporal

support to their communities. In *Woodrow*, though, the church, while definitely a sanctuary, provides more of a sense of solace than of outright spiritual communion. As with all of the buildings in *Woodrow*, the church is in ruins. But closer inspection shows that it has an occupant: a small female figure playing the outsized pipe organ, one far too large for any country church. She is playing to empty pews, another ghost in a town of ghosts. She is physically present though, as opposed to the figures in the videos, and unlike the hockey players, she is not frozen; this figure is robotic. *Woodrow*, then, is not completely a ghost town; it has this one resident. As befits a work that is as personal as this, the notion of residency is not so cut-and-dried. The figure is based upon the artist's paternal grandmother, who does not live in Woodrow any longer, but rather lives, as do the artist's maternal grandparents, in the nearby town of Lafleche. Patterson's *Woodrow*, his imaginative construction of his town, contains all of his grandparents, or at least reflections of them, as well as other relatives, recognizing that none of us is an island, that we are as much creations of our inner lives as we are of our experiences of family and community. In the basement of the church there is a video playing of a bowling game – an elderly couple (if not outright portraits, then certainly references to his maternal grandparents) repeatedly bowl a few frames. The church basement is, of course, a centre for community recreation – and although conflating the local bowling alley into the church may be seen as a little cheeky, it reflects the role Patterson has assigned the church: it is a place of sanctuary and security. As he writes, “The church represents a place of hope. Things will always seem to be better within.” (A biographical note: Patterson, who lives in the farmhouse that is represented in this exhibition, the former home of his paternal grandparents, regularly goes bowling with his maternal grandparents and their friends. Their presence in the church does represent hope and sanctuary, in the way that any sense of a loving home represents hope.)

The homestead part of the exhibition goes from the public life of a town to the private life of the individuals within the community. Where the church, the rink and the elevator represent the public face of *Woodrow*, the elements of the farm – the house, the barn, the shop and the grain bins – represent the private element. As such, the ghosts that occupy these sites are much more idiosyncratic, representing the private activity of the

town's ghosts, the kinds of activity we get up to when there is no one around to see.

The Barn

For any child visiting a farm, barns are sources of mystery and excitement. There are animals, equipment, places to explore. Far from being a working site, for the visitor the barn is a site to let loose the imagination, a theatre within which the imagination can play. But it is also where the work gets done, and Patterson is able to combine both the pragmatic and the fanciful in his sculpture and video of the barn. From three sides, the barn looks quite innocuous: a weathered grey structure, seemingly ready to fall down, it represents a common sight in rural Canada. From the front, however, one sees that the barn has been transformed into a theatre, with gold leaf and arched pillars – a vaudeville movie house rather than a working building. The film that plays, *Romancing the Farm*, is a cyclical evocation of farm life, replete with animals (wild and domestic), farmers, children, recreation and work. It all plays out against a static backdrop, with Patterson's distinctive hurdy-gurdy-inspired soundtrack. The crops grow, we see a deer and a coyote, a chicken, a pig and cow, plus a young man driving a snowmobile, a child bundled up in a snowsuit, and, in a moment of wry humour, a farmer in his underwear working on an old personal computer. He then is seen, still in his underwear, driving a tractor. There is a scene of a young man shooting cans with a .22, and then we see a gopher (the other common target of .22s on the farm). The piece ends with the "wheat" shrinking back into the ground, at which point the video loops, repeating *ad infinitum*, like the seasons.

The Shop

The shop is both Patterson's machinist grandfather's working workshop, an evocation of the place that the local farmers brought broken equipment to be fixed, and the studio of the artist. In one half of the shop we find all of the heavy equipment: metal lathes, drill presses, a forge, welders, etc. This was his grandfather's milieu, and it is still there, a sort of monument. In the other half, separated by a sheet of plastic, is Graeme Patterson's space, the studio where the sculptures in *Woodrow* were made, and where

many of the animations were filmed. Miniature versions of all nine works in *Woodrow* are found in this space – one, the house, even has a working video, mimicking the large version.

In a remarkable animated work, *Lathe*, Patterson has animated a large metal lathe, as well as objects around it, creating a piece that is projected against the back wall of The Shop, serving as the ghost in this piece, not of a person, but of the activity that once animated the workshop. If the elevator is the heart of the town, then the shop is the heart of the show – the most direct evocation of Patterson’s bond with his grandfather, and perhaps even the indicator of the roots of Patterson as an artist. The ghosts in this small garage are numerous: the shadows of the sculptures, which are in turn shadows of the town; the ghost of Patterson’s grandfather who is invoked in the lathe animation, and, in the end, the ghost of the artist himself, his own activity mirrored in the work. *Woodrow* is as much a self-portrait as it is a community portrait, and it is within the walls of his grandfather’s workshop that we perhaps get the clearest glimpse of the artist.

The House

The ruined house that is part of *Woodrow* is modelled after the house where Patterson now lives. This imaginative house— the most decayed building in town— is home only to vermin and to ghosts. In the basement, an elderly couple plays horseshoes in a charming video that refers to the similar piece in the church basement. The cellar in these ruins is anything but a dank, dark place. Rather, it is there that the “ghosts” play – an innocent undertaking despite the years of experience suggested by the characters. Upstairs, the house is riddled with holes, walls are collapsing in instances, sections of floor are missing, reminiscent of a Gordon Matta-Clark sculpture. As with all of Patterson’s sculptures, the details are just right, down to the particular bend in the television aerial. In the sculptural house, the television is on (ghost towns still have electricity it seems), and it is playing the video *Monkey and Deer*, reprised from the grain elevator. In front of the television set, a section of floor acts as a screen for another animation, the short work *Pests*. Animals (rats, mice, gophers, snakes and blackbirds, perhaps starlings) have taken over the house – scurrying across the floor in ever-

increasing numbers. The house, the castle of bourgeois ideals, is the most ruined of the buildings, and infested with pests – Patterson’s strangely serene ghost town is at its most disturbed here.

Where the elevator is the centre of the town, the house is the centre of the farm compound. As the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote:

For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the world...the real beginnings of images, if we study them phenomenologically, will give concrete evidence of the values of inhabited space, of the non-I that protects the I.

Perhaps in this insight from Bachelard we find why the house is so much more ruined than any other building in *Woodrow*: as the seat of the imagination, as the protector of the “I,” there is so much more to be wrecked.

The Grain Bins

The last elements of the farm compound are four grain bins, each one from a recognizably different era on the farm – perhaps the four generations between the artist’s great-grandparents and himself. (Until recently, the ruined house of Patterson’s great-grandparents still stood next to a line of grain bins on the farm—stood, that is, until one of his uncles hauled it off with a tractor, dumping it in a sand-pit at the edge of the farm.)

Three of these sculptures have video components, while the last has objects from the animations. This work is the most overtly humorous in the show, although all of Patterson’s sculptures and animations have elements of humour. The three animations featuring the characters Pierre and Gerrard, however, are something else. In these short pieces, Patterson evokes the kind of ribald humour beloved by teenage boys – the videos are replete with gags about stealing underwear, other horseplay and fairly dangerous games created on the spur of the moment. Each short animation (they were originally commissioned by the Confederation Centre for the Arts as cellphone animations) owes as much to family story and legend (the characters are very loosely based on family members) as they do to Saturday morning cartoons and slapstick comedy from the silent film era. Laurel and Hardy are as much models for these characters as anyone else.

The Pothole

Leaving the compound we get to the edge of the farm and the outskirts of town. The road leading out of *Woodrow* features a huge pothole that has seemingly swallowed up most of the trappings of the animations: a pick-up truck and other farm equipment from the grain bins, the snowmobile from *Romancing the Farm*, sheathing from the roof of the hockey rink, some of the ubiquitous ladders from various animations and so on. It is based in reality; there is a pit at the end of a dirt track on the farm in Woodrow that holds old equipment, barrels, scrap wood, metal and even, as mentioned, a house. The video for this is a haunting landscape, a 16-hour time-lapse image of the prairie and sky beyond the farm in Woodrow, compressed into a two-minute piece. This dumping ground, with its evocation of endless spaces, is the end of the human presence in *Woodrow*. And as with so much that reflects human presence, it is our wreckage that is left to testify to our absence.

The Deer

Deer are plentiful in southern Saskatchewan, and it is not at all uncommon for a herd of deer to be found in the driveway of the artist's house in Woodrow. They are often seen in the fields, looking at spectators with utter indifference, unless one strays too close, at which point they bound away, seemingly as one. The deer sculpture in *Woodrow* evokes the presence of animals in the landscape, the natural world encroaching on the town. A cluster of five deer stand under a tree in a small section of landscape similar to that found in the animation *Monkey and Deer*. Triggered by the approach of an onlooker, all five heads turn, as one, and the eyes of the deer sculptures light up, mimicking the effect of deer in headlights at night. The deer serve as an indicator that we have gone as far as we can go on our tour – beyond them is the terra incognita of the natural world, one not just unknown, but ultimately unknowable.

Monkey and Deer

That terra incognita between the human and the animal, between *Woodrow* and the world, is the subject of Patterson's short film *Monkey and Deer*. Dreams are the essence of this work, as everything in it is geared to evoke that state of dreaming – a transformative space within which magic unfolds. The monkey stands in for the human, an avatar for the artist, who may or may not be the result of the transformation of one of the human figures in the film, the caretaker of the elevator. Throughout the film the monkey chases the deer, trying to ride on its back and being rebuffed. The side story of travelling through the town looking for the monkey's lost hat -- a makeshift construction of gears and cogs that is eventually broken -- serves to bring us through the imaginative world of *Woodrow*, introducing us to many of the sites that will have become familiar through the sculptures in the exhibition. The final scenes, where the monkey is seemingly killed and then revived by the deer, at which point the two ride off into the sunset, reprises the notion of the ghost town that plays throughout this installation – human and nature are only reconciled in dreams, or in death.

Thank-you for Visiting Woodrow

When the tour is over, we return to the routine of our daily lives. *Woodrow* is a construct of the imagination—worlds within worlds—a fabulist construct that creates a portrait of the artist as it depicts the world of imagination and myth that sustains him. Patterson's *Woodrow* is tinged with sadness. Its theme of ghosts, especially as it refers to actual places and persons, can't help but serve as a *memento mori*, reminding us that we too shall fade. Yet it is also a world filled with humour and joy, with play and a sense of security. Why then is it in ruins?

I promised not to write poems in my zeal for ideas, so I will not try to answer this question, except insofar as my referring again to Williams Carlos Williams can be seen as an attempt at an answer. *Woodrow* is in ruins because it embodies an idea about a life (and elements of a way of life). And remember, "...a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life." *Woodrow* is a romantic vision, suggesting the entire sweep of a life, from the beginning through to the end. Patterson himself describes

the project as, “romantic visions of the people, events, and creations that make up the legends in the community.” The ruins make sense, depicting the inevitable result of the passage of time. I began this essay quoting one poet, and will conclude with another, William Butler Yeats, whose invocation of his own world in the poem, *The Circus Animals’ Desertion* is a brilliant distillation of the creative process. Here is the concluding passage:

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder’s gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

In the end, *Woodrow* is about that “foul rag and bone shop,” that ruin in the heart, the exploration of which provides us with the only real insights into our true selves we’re ever likely to get. Graeme Patterson’s loving tribute to a community, to the world of his childhood, to the living world of his imagination, is the polar opposite of Yeats’s despair – despite the inevitability of *Woodrow*’s decline, this work is steeped in hope – the ladders are still there, amidst the old iron and old rags of the buildings and places of Woodrow, Saskatchewan.

– Ray Cronin
Halifax, 2006