

Experiment makes puppets of art buyers

Calgary artist involves collectors in growing project

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Graeme Patterson is an artist who wants something in return when he sells you a work from his latest project, and that is to make you a part of it all.

The Puppet Collective, on view at TrepanierBaer Gallery, started last year as Patterson travelled across Canada with his touring show Wood-row, a large installation with scale models of buildings that recreates a deserted Saskatchewan prairie town and a stop-motion animation photographed in the installation, which was also a film set. You might have seen Woodrow here at the Illingworth Kerr Gallery in 2007.

The artist and animator is a dedicated people-watcher. While travelling in Canada and Europe, he would spot a person of interest on the street, in a mall, airport, restaurant, almost anywhere. Within a week, he would sit down to recall the one who stuck in his head in detail and in three-dimensions.

Out would come his materials--wire for the armature, foam for the body, pantyhose and hot glue for the skin, fur or feathers for the hair, bits of fabric for the clothes, Sculpey for the heads--and he would make and dress the figure. Thus a puppet, whose flexible body and limbs can be manipulated to assume different postures and gestures, would find its way into the world as a quick character sketch.

But buy one of these puppets and you will find that it's you who is under scrutiny. The colourful cast of characters is a clever project in which art meets sociology. The first 52 puppets represent people of all sizes, shapes and ages, genders, races and walks of life. They are a cross-section not only of Canadians but of diverse populations everywhere.

As each is sold, it will be replaced by a puppet representing the collector of the work. It is a condition of sale that buyers must agree to take part in the project and to supply the artist with photographs of themselves from which he will then fashion a 3-D likeness.

The cross-section of people in general will gradually turn into a cross-section of art buyers and collectors. At least half of them, so far anyway, will be collectors in Calgary. But the project doesn't wind up there.

"The idea is that once I make puppets of the people who buy the puppets,

Graeme Patterson's cycle of puppets will continue until "it seems natural to end."He says it's an experiment to see how long it will go.

they will be for sale, too," says the 29-year-old artist who lives in Halifax. "So it will continue the cycle until it seems natural to end or it will continue to go. It's more of an experiment to see how long it will go and how many

people will become part of it.

"I know there are people who might not want to have a puppet of themselves floating around out there for somebody else to buy. They are kind of like voodoo dolls, which is part of the fun and part of the social experiment and the potential of it. I'm excited to see how it unfolds."

With this modus operandi, Patterson turns his first exhibition in a commercial gallery into more than the sum of its salable parts. The project rules go a step farther to give a puppet buyer the first crack at purchasing his or her own puppet likeness.

"The first 52 are random people," Patterson says. "The next 52 are real people, and I won't make anymore random people."

Of course, if all the collectors of the first edition bought their own images from the second edition, the project would come to an end fairly quickly. But Patterson is documenting each character sketch as an animated image by placing it on a small turntable and photographing it 27 times. When Patterson animates the still frames, the puppet spins. He says he might make an animation with all of the puppets after the project is finished.

It could take the form of a cocktail party, say, or a collectors' reunion. Before then, people can go to Patterson's website at graemepatterson.com where, he says, "they'll be able to see who bought who, and investigate and try to figure out why someone one bought that one or another? No names will be given to protect the buyers, so it might also become a game of which collectors do you recognize? For the moment, though, the first gang of 52 is displayed in individual cases that run in a line around the walls of the big main gallery and the hall gallery at eye level. They are made with the same mixture of materials and in the same way that

Patterson makes all of his work. Their roughness and ephemerality are part of their raffish charm. They are, after all about shape-shifting, which should be very interesting to watch.

Review

Graeme Patterson: The Puppet Collective, Selected Work, On View At Trepanier-baer Gallery, Through Feb. 7.

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