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Unknown soldiers

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Questions & Artists: Last year, artist Graeme Patterson turned one stranger a week into a figurine. The replicas of everyone he didn't recognize are now on display in Calgary

Leah Sandals,



courtesy of the artist

Though it employs millions of people, and entertains millions more, worldwide, the art world is often thought of as a small place. And as Canadian artist Graeme Patterson shows, it can certainly be miniaturized. In his new exhibition, The Puppet Collective, which just opened at Trepanier Baer Gallery in Calgary, Patterson unveils tiny replicas of some colourful characters he's encountered during his art-world travels. What's more, any willing buyers of his art will soon be miniaturized, too.

Here, Patterson talks about the grander vision behind his pint-sized figurines.

Q *In the past, you've created miniature versions of your Halifax art school and your grandparents' Saskatchewan hometown. Why is making miniatures so appealing?*

A I guess I've always been into miniatures. As a kid I collected a lot of action figures. It was a big part of my world. The funny thing, though, is that all the action figures I collected when I was a kid eventually disappeared in garage sales. So now whenever I see one in Value Village, I buy it. I have a lot of WWF wrestlers, the big rubber bendy ones.

Q *The miniatures you've created for this current show - who are they based on?*

A My past projects were based on people and places I know really well. But over the past few years of travelling a lot, I've been taking notes on people I don't know. At the beginning of last year I decided to make one puppet a week based on a stranger who resonated in my mind - maybe it was what they were wearing, or some other visible part of their personality. So now I have 52 puppets of random people.

Q *You do have a great variety - from punk rockers to senior citizens. But what makes these puppets rather than just small sculptures?*

A Well, I also make animated films, so these are stop-motion puppets, fully posable in everything but their facial expression. They're about six to eight inches tall, about a one-to-10 scale. So buyers can pose them if they want. I haven't used these for films, because they get pretty worn down if you do that, but I have been taking "class photo" pictures of them.

Q *Speaking of buyers, you're requiring everyone who buys a puppet to submit a photo of themselves so you can make a miniature sculpture of them. Why's that?*

A The more I travel to art fairs, the more I find collectors themselves are interesting characters. Also, this is my first show in a commercial art gallery, and I wanted the project to make sense with the venue. So I tried to put collectors into the project a little more. Rather than just buying a work, they become part of the project. In a way, trying to collect a collector became interesting to me.

Q *Do you think collectors are overlooked in terms of their public influence on, say, what museums show*

or acquire?

A Not really. I think their names are known. But their image often isn't. I don't know how collectors will react to all this, but I've talked to a few that are quite excited about it.

Q *Why did you title this as a "collective" rather than a "collection" then?*

A In a way, from this point on, it's more other people's buying decisions than my creative decisions that will determine what puppets I make. If someone keeps buying the same puppet, I will have to keep replacing that puppet with a reproduction of them. So it will eventually be more a community portrait rather than just a collection of puppets - especially if I keep doing "class photos" every year. One day, I'd like to use all the photographs of buyers and sculptures to make a catalogue of who bought who and who's connected to who - almost a Facebook-type thing.

Q *Interesting. What's next for you?*

A Right now, I'm experimenting with animations, trying to work my own body into them - trying to put myself in with puppets in their scale. And I've got ideas for a big project on my first best friend. He moved to Japan when we were little kids and I don't know where he is. Part of the project is actually finding him in live-action documentary film and the other half is recreating my memories of him through robotics.

• *Graeme Patterson: The Puppet Collective runs till Feb. 7 at Calgary's Trepanier Baer Gallery. For details, visit trepanierbaer.com.*

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