



**Graeme Patterson: The Puppet Collective** at Trépanier Baer

*by Jasia Stuart*

The first question that comes to mind upon seeing Graeme Patterson's new body of figurative work, showing and selling at Calgary's Trépanier Baer Gallery, is what makes them puppets? It's a bit of a silly question, but it seems inconsistent that an artist like Patterson whose work also entails so much mechanical or animated movement, would call still figures puppets.



Patterson demystified this incongruity in a lecture he delivered at the Alberta College of Art and Design, the afternoon before his show's opening, to a packed crowd of students. The figures, which Patterson had been attempting to create at a rate of one per week as a New Year's resolution, are indeed fully mobile puppets, created to have the same functional potential as ones he has previously used in his animation projects.

Their potential for motion is central to the extremely individual characterization that defines each puppet. Each one varies from the previous slightly in physical stature, though if they were lined up next to their mass produced contemporaries, they would come out slightly taller than Batman but significantly shorter than Barbie. Their potential for movement, and obvious

playfulness, links them to dolls and action figures, but the way they are constructed could not be more different from the cloned plastic faces of robotically articulated playthings. Enchanting in their detail, which attends to everything from the type of fabric to accessory objects such as keys, they are equally rough, with dabs of paint and raw edges making no attempt to conceal their material origins.



Patterson describes these figures as caricatures, based on actual people from memory. Like caricatures, they exaggerate the features of their model, though unlike many caricatures, the puppets give no hint of satirizing these features. Instead, the puppets contain a sense of reverence for the people they recreate; in each puppet there is some kind of affirmation that

each of the characters are undeniably themselves.

Maybe it is too common to praise an artist for capturing 'the essence' of their subject, but the translation Patterson executes from person to puppet is far from commonplace. Each figure's muscular-skeletal structure is poised, about to move. The posture of the puppets conveys the mannerisms they might have if brought to life. The physiological structure of each puppet indicates a deep working knowledge of the relationship between kinetics and individual anatomy, it is easy to imagine which puppet would drag its feet and which would dance the most wildly.



Another subtle feat of recreation that Patterson accomplishes in this work is present in detail and scale. The practice of puppet making may fit more into a tradition craftsmanship than fine art, and Patterson does this association justice through his commitment to detail and shrewd approach to materials. If a certain puppet's sweater needs brightly colored stripes, Patterson paints them right onto the fabric with a gloopy layer of paint. Hair becomes feathers and at this reduced size feathers are hairier than hair; they catch the movement, the tangled quality that hair has when attached to a human head.



The work also benefits from a keen sense of when not to give too much away. Features, hands and other details are often left quite abstract and rough. This emphasizes the materials

but also builds realism: the blur of people moving quickly past, or the fuzziness facial features have in memories. Equally, these inconclusive details function in a theatrical way, invoking a suspension of disbelief instead of illusion or trickery.



The exhibition demands one final question of the puppet watcher: what kind of puppet would I make? A theoretical question for most, it is a more real and perhaps exciting reality for anyone looking to collect the work. Patterson, in what he describes as an attempt to compensate for being parted from each of his puppets, will be crafting a new puppet in the image of each buyer. The most famous puppet of all time just wanted to be a real boy, but real people, it may turn out, crave just the opposite.

*All images courtesy the artist.*

Graeme Patterson

Trépanier Baer

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