

# Getting the big picture

By LLOYD DYKK

**H**ENRI Robideau, still flushed from his recent trip to Sudbury, doesn't know whether to call it a pilgrimage or — since he is a self-proclaimed "giantologist" — a dig.

On his Vancouver to Montreal trip last October, he photographed between 25 and 30 "giant things." The photographs will be exhibited in a show called *A PanCanadian Review of Panoramic Views* beginning Tuesday at the Coburg Gallery in Gastown.

His grail was Sudbury, with its 40-foot high Canadian nickel, erected in 1964. In the photograph, the nickel is reminiscent of one of T.J. Eckleburg's lenses in *The Great Gatsby*, staring vacantly from a roadside billboard at wasteland. Robideau says, "With thousands out of work and the mines shut down, this may be the only big money left in Canada."

One of the things he finds interesting is what he calls the new depression. In Sudbury, he saw crowds of people just hanging around the malls, as if keeping in nostalgic contact with the things they couldn't afford to buy.

"But I could have got as good a picture in Richmond. The most graphic thing I've seen yet was a queue of people camping out in sleeping bags overnight outside the Temporary Manpower office at East Second and Quebec."

He feels he should be approaching all this from the classical standpoint of the Farm Security Administration, the American public works project of the 1930s that commissioned photographers like Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange to document people in hard times.

"Even though I look at their work with reverence, and feel that I should be doing social things that count, I always seem to go off in silly, humorous directions." So, he does things like photographically documenting himself getting a haircut. "Can't be a hippie any more. Gotta get a job, look decent. That kind of thing."

But the theme of his work is out-size things, pop-architectural oddities and monstrosities whose common note is the probability of their confusing a 25th-century anthropologist. He has volumes of photographs of things such as the giant orange-shaped restaurant in Montreal, the cowboy hat gas station (with men's and women's restroom-boots) in Seattle, the double life-size Brontosaurus geological museum of Cabazon, Cal. and, perhaps weirdest of all, the figure of Jesus on a mount near Drumheller preaching to the chicken wire and concrete dinosaurs of the Prehistoric Park.

**A**RE a lot of these things kitsch? Robideau wouldn't like to think that. He says a lot of definitions are applied after the fact. "People just saw these things and then wanted something like it for themselves. I guess I should have more theories because I do call myself a giantologist, but it's a tongue-in-cheek title. I have nothing else to call myself for being interested in these things. I just have so much fun photographing them."

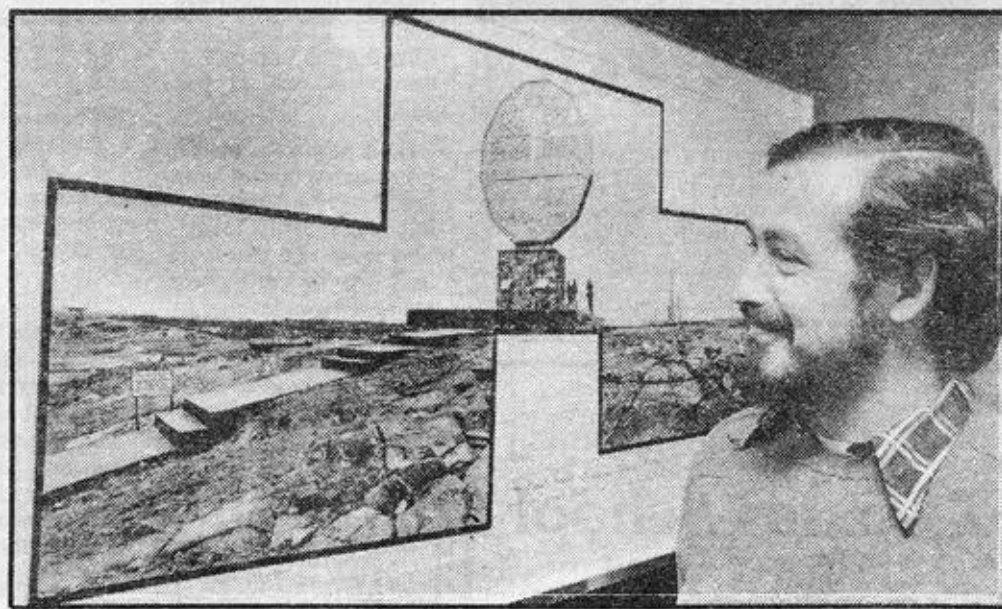
His interest seems a combination of the buff and archivist. The oddities he focusses on are destined to vanish. Nobody maintains a dinosaur or a giant revolving hamburger. He thinks these aberrances are worth preserving, at least on a flat piece of paper.

Henri (born Henry) Robideau, 36, is of Quebecois ancestry and was born in Connecticut. He moved with his family to San Diego in 1956. Driving around Los Angeles with his father who was looking for work there, he remembers staring open-mouthed at the pop-surrealism of L.A.'s giant things: the hot dog-shaped cafe Tail of the Pup, built in 1946, and the famous Brown Derby (1926-1981).

His chequered academic career ("My attention span was short.") included a toe or two in various California colleges. He began in chemistry but wanted to be an artist. The only success he had was at a technical school at Oakland in a photography course given by an old-time Hollywood cameraman. "I wanted to be a film maker but you've got to work well with large groups of people. I'm too much an eccentric, I guess."

**H**E CAME here in 1970 from Berkeley to visit his brother and liked Vancouver right off. "A big city with a small town flavor. They weren't paving over everything in sight, like in California. Berkeley was an extremely violent place then. You had to be really strong or else you went crazy with the daily dose of violence you got. It was so calm here."

For several years, he made his living by reproducing historical photographs for the Vancouver Archives and the Vancouver Public Library and worked on a book on the pioneer photographer Mattie Gunterman. This took him to La Crosse, Wis., where she spent her early years. There, he found a virtual Easter Island of pop-monuments: a giant bull, a statue of Hiawatha, a giant pizza chef, and a giant six-pack of Heileman's Old-Style Beer. There are national differences in giant things. American ones are usually commercial; Canadian ones have more to do with civic pride.



KEN OAKES

**HENRI ROBIDEAU** with Sudbury's nickel, and his photograph of the vanished giant loaf at Broadway and Arbutus

Giant things are a relic of former, slower times, he says — a function of the older highways that gave people time to glance at the roadside. The black-outs of the Second World War helped spawn an interest in out-size things — commercial edifices that were big enough to draw attention by their size alone.

One such was the now vanished giant hand at the corner of Broadway and Arbutus that had held a cottage-sized loaf of bread for Mother Hubbard Bakery since 1947. It was Robideau's favorite local giant thing, having everything he thinks a giant thing should have: "It was something from life that was bigger than life and it really caught your eye. A lot of giant things are borderline, but it was like a part of a real giant."

He also has a fondness for the once-revolving jar of olives on top of the McLaren's Foods building on the Grandview Highway, and la-

ments the waste of the 13-metre-long fibre-glass diving woman, long-languishing on the roof of the Jantzen building. The bathing-suited women were distributed to all the branches by the parent company, Robideau says, but the local company has refused to mount theirs "because they disapprove of that type of advertising."

He ruffles further through the photographs. Somehow the cityscape of the post-boom Calgary has found its way into his catalogue of giant things. The angles are eerie; the buildings seem to be toppling.

"It was like seeing a ghost of modern life. Ten years ago, you rarely saw a building over three storeys. Now, you don't see any under 30, but they're empty. In October, there were at least 10 buildings left uncompleted. They were like monoliths. To me, it had more a feeling of depression than Sudbury."