

Henri Robideau



The Giant Igloo Church and beautiful downtown Inuvik, N.W.T.,

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A Gianthropologist's Panoramic Views

by Helga Pakasaar

"A PanCanadian Review of Panoramic Views" by Gianthropologist and Photographer Henri Robideau at the new Coburg Gallery, #2 314 Cordova St., Vancouver, B.C., (604) 688-0866, January 4-January 29.

"A PanCanadian Review of Panoramic Views by Gianthropologist and Photographer Henri Robideau" is reminiscent of a 19th century eccentric's scrapbook. This exhibition — the first at Vancouver's new Coburg Gallery — is a parody of tourist snapshots and art photography as well as the artist's identity. Robideau's irony is not only a stylistic device but human absurdity is the very subject of his work. His distinctive brand of humour, evident also in earlier works like the photo-story of his sweetheart Jeannie (1980), is a way to be personal. In this exhibition the artist's personality is that of a punster, storyteller, archivist, social commentator, lover of giant things and a serious photographer.

Adopting his anthropologist-out-on-a-dig persona, Robideau embarks on a Robert Frank type journey documenting the cultural peculiarities of Canada. This 1980s version of the American Dream run amuck reveals the persistence of our need for spiritual faith. However, the alienation in Frank's world of cars and diners has now found a release in eccentricities such as giant quasi-religious icons. The quirky, low-budget monoliths that intrigue Robideau — an enormous nickel, a

corporation's out-sized milk bottle, a giant Jesus overlooking a valley of grazing dinosaurs — are cultural artifacts expressing our fetishes, anxieties, and fantasies. Paul Sisson's taxidermy studio and Wilderness Fort Museum displaying the taxidermist's dream, a giant "sasquatch," is one of Canada's unofficial historical sites. The "Giant Batch of Signs" in Watson Lake, N.W.T., is a mural of hundreds of identities brought to the northern wilderness. This communal marking of territory is a more absurd and profound act than Ian Baxter's urination performance at the north pole. Like remnants from a larger dream, these giant creations offer diversion, humour and reassurance in an otherwise alienating environment.

Robideau's photographs are not without social criticism. These giant creations, like the Frans Hals pavement painting, are rather banal fantasies. The Giant Nickel in Sudbury, Ontario, stands isolated in an industrial wasteland. This Pop atrocity has become an official monument with its descriptive plaque, stairway leading to the pedestal, picnic table nearby, and visitors photographing one another on the site (but, of course, not of the sight). Robideau's joke scrawled underneath the image — "with thousands out of work and the mines shut down, this may be the only big money left in Canada" — is corny, but pointed.

An equally bleak scene is "The Giant Igloo Church and beautiful downtown Inuvik." This instant ghetto/town, complete with a burnt-

out Legion hall, could have been lifted from a corner of a thousand North American cities, but it is the igloo church that provides a sense of place and history. This structure is a bizarre visual expression of cultural appropriation. The Hudson's Bay Company logo in the distance reminds us of the politics behind the conversion of the Eskimos. But, nonetheless, the rather friendly, maternal building is the most human sign in this no-man's land. Like the giant milk bottle competing with Montreal high rises, the eccentric eventually seems more natural than the official structures.

The panorama format allows Robideau to place these objects of his fascination in their context. In an earlier series, "Tourist's Guide to the Giant Things and Mattie Gunterman Historical Sites of LaCrosse, Wisconsin," the giant things were the focus of his images and, in his collection of "finds," seemed more like fetishized status symbols. Each panoramic view is an assemblage of several photographs re-constructing the original scene. This process of re-structuring perception results in oddly shaped collages with perspectives that are askew and mismatched cars. These rather funky constructions are far from being traditional majestic vistas. In fact, the only landscape in this exhibition is an uncommanding view of the ocean seen through foliage.

Although Robideau has taken care to anchor these scenes with a central focus they also demand a narrative reading. After all, how else can one comprehend a detailed ten foot long photograph? The narrative element

in these pieces is emphasized by their size, the diaristic story texts, the reappearance of the same figure in each frame and the cinematic quality of these fractured scenes. In one of the earliest panoramas, "Susan Scott and the View from her Studio," Robideau plays with its narrative potential. The result is an elegant stringing together of her movements through a fantastical sense of time.

The most narrative piece is the before and after story of how "I rediscover my face after 15 years of long hair and beard . . . and give my male vanity a temporary boost." This 360° panoramic view of Robideau's kitchen records his haircut performance. In the first and last frames he poses with photos of himself as a young boy and, although the grin hasn't changed, the transformation confirms the impossibility of recapturing youthfulness. This piece has a westcoast funkiness to the scene itself as well as its self-effacing irony.

In contemporary art, irony is often merely a refuge for nastiness or a clever defence whereby the joke rests on a secret knowledge shared by an initiated elite. In Robideau's world, however, the joke is on us as well as them. Like the giant things, humour becomes the appropriate response to our world; it is survivalist and humanist.

With a Canada Council grant, Helga Pakasaar, Vancouver, B.C., is currently assembling a two-part exhibition of paintings, drawings, prints and photographs of North American Indians.



*The Giant Nickel, Sudbury, Ontario, Older 9, 1982.
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the mines shut down, this may be the only big money left in Canada. Henri Robideau 82*