

Henri Robideau
Cobourg Gallery
Vancouver
January 5 to 29

Henri Robideau's show, *PanCanadian Review of Panoramic Views*, marks the opening of Vancouver's new Cobourg Gallery for photography. Robideau's photographic works are first of all a focusing of his own temperament. Like certain women artists who consciously choose criteria different than those of the Mainstream, or folk artists who are unaware or uninterested in such issues, Robideau simply points his camera lens towards things he likes in an unselfconscious and nonacademic manner. True to his own personality and idiosyncrasies, he is, especially in regard to his familiar pictures of "giant things", the artist as tourist, cataloguer and collector of marginal beauties.

Twelve works hang in the intimate space of the gallery in a formally cohesive group: b&w works alike in their unevenly panoramic formats and thick black lines of exposed negatives. His desire for the panoramic view makes note of the discrepancies between the camera's limiting viewfinder, and the freer human eye in focus and perspective. His free-wheeling shots (even when taken on the tripod) and seemingly random splicing deems his method unscientifically spontaneous. The irregular shapes of the photo/objects often re-enforce the subject matter. For instance, the sagging shape of the *Thrift Store* panorama echoes the building's dilapidated structure; the even curve of the *Giant Ocean View* mirrors the swells and eddies of the tides.

Eight works are of "giant things": Giant Jesus and Dinosaurs at the prehistoric park in Drumheller, Alberta; the Giant Nickel at Sudbury, Ontario; a Giant Milk Bottle in Montreal; a Giant Igloo Church in Inuvik; a Giant Sidewalk Recreation of Frans Hals painting, "Two Boys Singing", on Bloor St. in Toronto; the Giant Sasquatch at Paul Sisson's Taxidermy studio and Wilderness Fort at Williams Lake, B.C.; a Giant Batch of Signs at Watson Lake in the Yukon, and the Giant Ocean obscured by fog from Greenpoint Pacific Rim National Park, Vancouver Island, B.C. (the last two pieces indirectly "giant things"). The other four works are of his kitchen, a local soccer match, Susan Scott in her Water St. studio and the St. Vincent De Paul's Thrift Store, all shot in Vancouver.

When pulled into an art vernacular, his attraction to enormous, garish objects obliquely aligns itself with the Surrealist challenge to the very notion of reality as explored through dreams and the life of the mind, and the Pop artists' attitudes of the fifties, challenging the tradition of Fine Art by insisting that popular culture runs parallel and is indeed essential to high art.

By virtue of the objects he selects to document, the work, directly or indirectly, sympathizes with popular street culture and exposes the expendable and often outrageous tastes of the

general public. These "giant things" speak foremost to our own culture's commitment to the automobile, stemming from the ever-expanding highways in Southern California during the 30's and 40's, and the general public's demands to a new response to how we could experience our environment now viewed through the windows of our ceaselessly moving automobiles. Robideau, true to this tradition, has set out on several road trips with the purpose of documenting as many "giant things" as he could. These cheaply built and easily erected structures were designed as shocking, humorous, eye-catchers, easily read and accessible to the passing motorist. Not always well received, the professional planners and upper class were uncomfortable with the blatant commercialism of most of these structures, and the high art elite feared the far reaching effects of the apparent decadence and vulgarity inherent in a giant six-pack of Helleman's Old-Style Beer.

As a photographer, Robideau is specifically interested in preserving the past and making it into something collectable, to be fondly remembered and learned from. Artifacts of the roadside scene often lack the usual documentation of more conventional monuments and towards this end he works. As such architectural aberrations as Robideau is fond of begin to decay and disappear, he feels a certain urgency to get as much of it documented as he can. He is, in a sense, an agent "against" the cult of the future. Who would have suspected that once the cuff blew off the giant hand that held the Loaf of bread at the Mother Hubbard Bakery at 4th and Arbutus in Vancouver, the entire eroding structure would be removed and destroyed, only to be remembered through photo/documents such as Robideau postcards?

In this show he pays heed to the recession, and subtle religious refer-

ences are laced throughout two or three works. As one who grew up in a house where holes drilled in the living room walls were carefully lined with tin foil and reverently filled with miniature Madonnas, he captures the Giant Jesus, Igloo Church and St. Vincent De Paul's Thrift Store with tender regard. On the whole, the work is imbued with his good humour and uncynical pursuit of the simple life, and an unobtrusive notion of what is good directs his eccentricities.

For an audience which demands art to make a strong ideological statement Robideau's work may be, ultimately, unsatisfying. His liberal viewpoint might be considered by some, no point at all. One may not be content to always be a tourist, and the relentless search for entertainment and amusement can all too easily become a way of life, as in many regards it already has. To propagate the myths of exotica as fostered in the "good life" of blacktop and burger-joints in the Southern California of the 30's and 40's is a somewhat untenable venture, indirectly the work may be read as such, but I believe it is with the eye of a Surrealistic archivist that Robideau sets his personal historical mandate and, foremost, sees the visually hilarious and the sentimentally poignant civic pride in the likes of the towering Mr P.G. or a giant statue of Hiawatha.

Merike Talve



Installation view of Henry Robideau's exhibition at the Cobourg Gallery, Vancouver

photo: Jim Goeman