

Canadian Art

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Carol Wainio, Painter, Montreal

PERSONAL BESTS

Critics, curators, collectors,
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A Gathie Falk retrospective
George Woodcock on Toni Onley
Katherine Govier on women artists
The art of Paul Kane
Henri Robideau's giants

HENRI ROBIDEAU

On the road with Canada's foremost gianthropologist • by Daniel Wood



Buggy The Giant Ant, a character from blockbuster, ATTACK OF THE KILLER ANTS, Dianthropology can sometimes be BIG

Snapshot: The Trans-Canada Highway west of St. John's, Newfoundland winds through a blasted landscape of scrubby pines and scattered villages. There's practically nothing to console the eye. So it's with more than a little delight that Vancouver photographer Henri Robideau, halfway through his latest search for oversize roadside monuments and advertising sculptures, sees a sign up ahead that reads: DILDO. He slows down. "These people," Robideau thinks, "have to have seen the possibilities." As it turns out, the people of Dildo, Newfoundland, perhaps too aware of the possibilities, have chosen not to erect, so to speak, a giant tower in their town.

But elsewhere across North America — in

150 Canadian communities and over 1,000 in the U.S. — others have succumbed to that old promotional adage: think *big*. And that's what has propelled 39-year-old Robideau on his decade-long "giantthropological survey". Altogether, he has photographed over 300 Big Things: the 6-metre-high potato in Maugerville, New Brunswick; the two-storey-tall six-pack in La Crosse, Wisconsin; the 12-metre-long turtle in, of course, Turtleford, Saskatchewan; and the huge replica of a Symon's oil can in Rocanville, Saskatchewan that commemorates that town's contribution to modern technology — the trigger-operated oil can.

True, these monuments to local boosterism may never compete with the CN Tower

or Mount Rushmore as tourist attractions, but they do have, from Robideau's somewhat perverse perspective, a certain *je ne sais quoi*. Put bluntly, he says, "My stuff's hokey. It's uneducated art. It's something people can enjoy without knowing the art jargon. It's folk art."

His obsession with absurd roadside attractions goes back to the '50s when he crisscrossed North America with his itinerant U.S. Army father. He can still picture the old, rhyming Burma-Shave signs and Montreal's St. Joseph's Oratory, full as it was of thousands of crutches and Frère André's mummified heart. But it wasn't until 1973, when he noticed the thumb had fallen off the huge, sculpted hand holding a loaf of Mother Hub-



*Lucy Maud Montgomery's undiscovered
teaches giantthropologist Henri Robideau that
TROUBLE! Bonshaw, P.E.I., August 8, 1984.*

Henri Robideau 1984

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hard's bread on a Vancouver rooftop, that he glommed onto the idea of photographing this frequently surreal and fast-disappearing highway art. So far, he figures he's travelled over 40,000 kilometres, living out of the backseat of his car, on what he calls his "digs" for Big Things.

Snapshot: Robideau climbs out of his vehicle on a wind-swept morning in Kyle, Saskatchewan. His companion in the overflowing Plymouth van, wife Jeannie Kamins, produces the video camera to document Robideau's latest find — a 3-metre-high woolly mammoth that memorializes the unearthing of some fossil bones nearby. Robideau inspects the concrete beast, feeling a bit disappointed that it is not genuinely over-size. Not like the 7.5-metre-high moose outside Moosejaw or the equally enormous artichoke in Castroville, California. He takes

several pictures, making sure to include the surrounding panorama. He then walks towards the video camera and pronounces in a laconic voice, "This is one of the best things in town." The camera, as if on cue, makes a 360-degree pan of Kyle. Except for some telephone poles and a couple of houses, it is, in fact, the only thing in town.

It is this perspective, this juxtaposition that gives Robideau's photos their humour. Not only is he interested in the structures as pop artefacts, but he shows them in context, avoiding postcard glamour. The irony is intended. So, Sudbury's huge replica of the 12-sided Canadian nickel appears to loom over, but doesn't conceal, the belching smokestack beyond. And the giant Dutch shoe-shaped house in Thunder Bay seems all the more ridiculous with a folding aluminum lawnchair out front. "The more absurd," says

Robideau, "the more I like it."

In fact he often underlines the absurdity of his photos by creating oddly shaped panoramic collages. The simple rectangle is frequently tossed out, and equally often, it seems, he can't avoid adding a cryptic message scrawled beneath the photos as a sort of satirical "wish you were here". A 2.4-metre-long Prince Edward Island ant reads, "Attack of the Killer Ant." And the Giant Sudbury nickel is "...the only big money left in Canada". What this adds up to, say the critics, is a challenge to photography's sincere and neatly boxed fine art tradition. Robideau is purposely casual. His pictures tell stories. Says Robideau, "Most photography today is just navel gazing. It shows photographers aren't relating to the world. For humour to work, someone *else* has to enjoy it. It has to be a shared thing. For me, interrelationships



*Giant Turtle and Turtle Hall of
home of the Canadian Turtle Derby,*

are what's important."

It disturbs Robideau that these dinosauric artefacts are disappearing, suffering in this age of electrified displays the lingering death of roadside kitsch. "The Big Things were created by the old highways," he explains. "At 40 or 50 miles an hour they worked. You suddenly came upon the Big Teepee Motel with these ridiculous teepees for cabins, or the brontosaurus beside the road announcing, 'Dinosaur Land — Just Ahead' and you said, 'Wow!' They weren't abstract. They were direct. You couldn't help looking. In the States they're mostly gone. The superhighways killed 'em. They used to be used for advertising, but they've pretty much been replaced by illuminated plastic signs now. It's funny. The Big Things are still being built in Canada. I guess we're just behind the times. They're mostly civic monu-

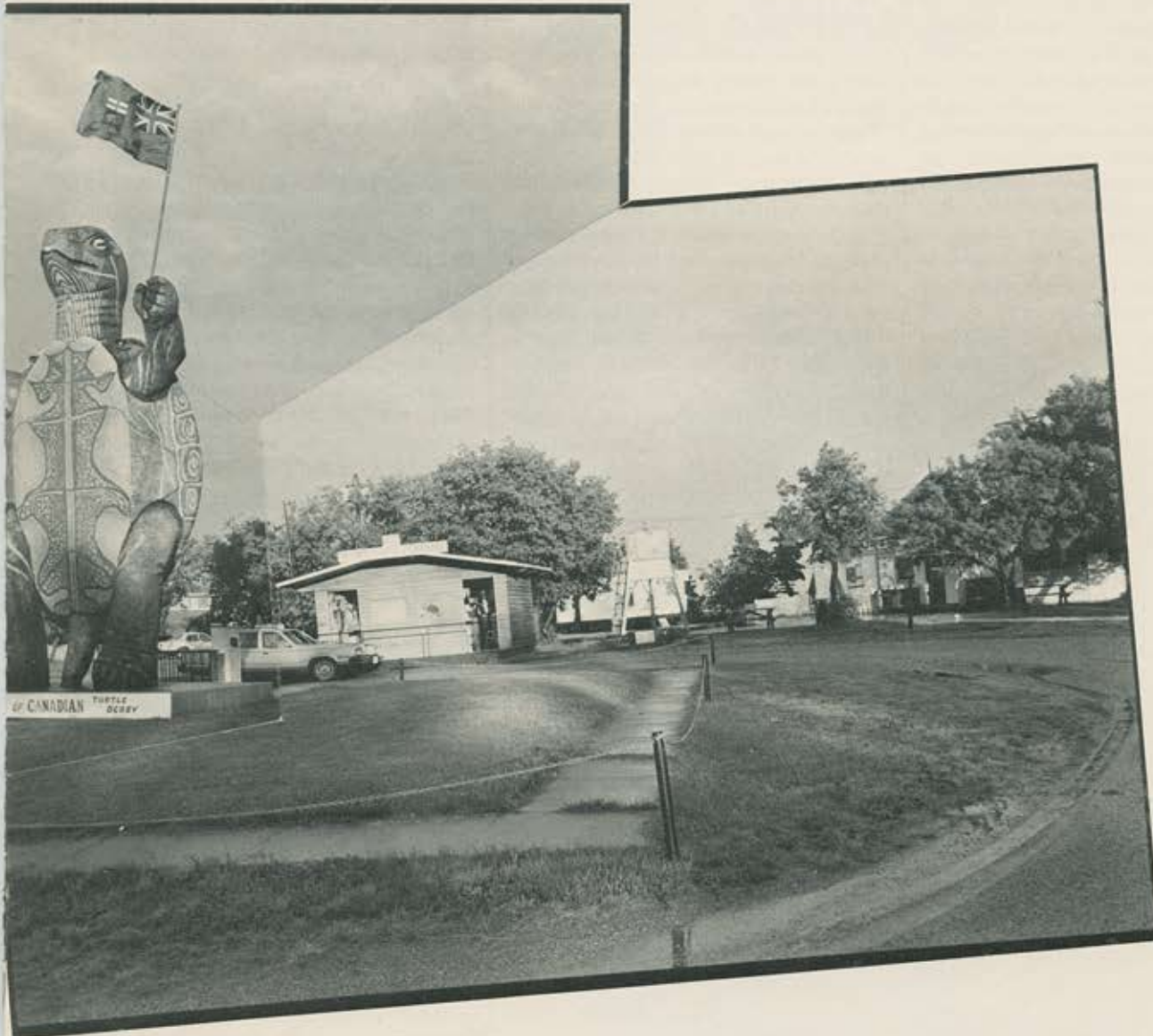
ments here; they inevitably show a pride of place. People pick a local animal often. I tell you: I've seen a lot of huge Canada geese. A lot of people must relate to the Canada goose. There are several giant moose and fish and lumberjacks. And two giant turtles. For me, I still like the silly ones best, like the huge teepee with the equally huge tomahawk sticking through its roof in Cut Knife, Saskatchewan. And the Red River cart in Selkirk, Manitoba is great. Forty feet high. You have to see someone beside it to realize just how large it is."

Snapshot: *In southern Manitoba, just north of the U.S. border, Robideau is searching for his second giant turtle, the one he's heard that stands in front of the Turtle Hall of Fame. Yep, the place, you know, where they hold the world famous International Turtle Derby. The sun sneaks out from be-*

neath some late afternoon thunder clouds. Just then, off the road to the right, appears a gigantic, 9-metre-high turtle, framed by a rainbow above the tiny prairie town of Boissevain. Robideau leaps from his van, shooting hurriedly. "It's always exciting," he says, "to get a Big Thing. It's like opening presents from your Christmas stocking. You know it'll probably be a little goofy. And that's the fun of it." CA

Robideau's photographs have appeared in many galleries across Canada. His newest show will run from October 29 to November 30 at Ottawa's Gallery 101.

Daniel Wood is a freelance writer living in Vancouver.



*Frame, Boissevain, Manitoba,
July 1984*

Henry Robideau