



Henri Robideau's *Eraser Street* photo work alludes to Vancouver's evictions, demolitions, and development boom.

Artist tackles displacement

VISUAL ARTS

HENRI ROBIDEAU: ERASER STREET

At grunt gallery until May 16. A Capture Photography Festival presentation

◆ Humour, compassion, and social criticism braid together in Henri Robideau's engaging photo-narratives. In his own words (posted on the website of Emily Carr University, where he is a sessional instructor), his overarching interest is in "the ironic tragedy of human existence". Although he has produced a large body of image-text works around social-justice issues, from affordable housing to the legacy of colonialism, Robideau is probably best known for his "Giganthropology" series. Produced during the 1970s and '80s, it depicts monumentally enlarged versions of ordinary objects and creatures, encountered on road trips across Canada and through parts of the United States. Robideau's photographs with handwritten explanatory text have documented gargantuan statuses of everything from a moose, a goose, a bull, and a loaf of bread to a Ukrainian Easter egg, a pizza chef, a Mountie, and, of course, that colossal Canadian nickel in Sudbury, Ontario.

The interest in the vernacular that reveals itself in "Giganthropology" is also present in Robideau's exhibition of photo-text works, *Eraser Street*, although here the various enormities are the ugly and banal

building projects in Vancouver that have wiped out humble housing and displaced the poor. The grunt gallery show surveys some 40 years of Robideau's career as he tracks structures, events, and issues that concern him within his chosen hometown. The title derives from his black-and-white photo in which a "Fraser St" sign has been temporarily altered to read "Eraser St", alerting us to enduring themes: eviction, demolition, and protest in a market-driven drama of development, development, and more development.

That the tent cities, political actions, and demonstrations that Robideau documents have occurred in an urban centre built on unceded Coast Salish territory is not without its own tragic irony. As writer Clint Burnham points out in his exhibition essay, "ongoing struggles over housing and the like take place on land...that has already been the object of dispossession."

Robideau's black-and-white photographs and text documenting "Mud City", a protest camp established by antidevelopment activists at the entrance to Stanley Park in 1971, are nicely echoed by his digitized colour photos of the occupation of Oppenheimer Park by homeless people in 2014, again with extensive handwritten text chronicling the event. Photos and text also document the demolition of old wooden houses on Beach Avenue in 1977, along with protests by those evicted from their homes. Again, these works are echoed by colour photographs and text, produced in 2013 and recording the last fourplex

left standing in the Little Mountain social-housing complex.

Other works focus on Solidarity protests in 1983, the promises of social housing made and then betrayed around the construction of Olympic Village, and other huge building projects that have sucked up public moneys without benefiting anyone other than developers, marketers, and speculators.

One of Robideau's most significant strategies is to collage his images together, either manually or digitally, to create panoramas with what Burnham describes as "blocky, choppy edges". Around these hitches and bumps and unslick transitions, he then handwrites his text in black ink, creating an interesting parallel with the ways the histories of the poor and dispossessed are constructed. Instead of producing a seamless narrative, Robideau patches together an up-and-down collection of perspectives, suggesting how different historical truths assert themselves through different tellings.

The collage techniques, the endearingly awkward handwriting, and the garish colours of the recent digitized photos also suggest a folk-art or outsider-art aesthetic. As the short video playing in the back of the gallery reveals, Robideau has experienced his share of precarious living situations and it's obvious where his sympathies lie. Despite their folksy appearance, however, these are extremely sophisticated works by a smart and accomplished artist.

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