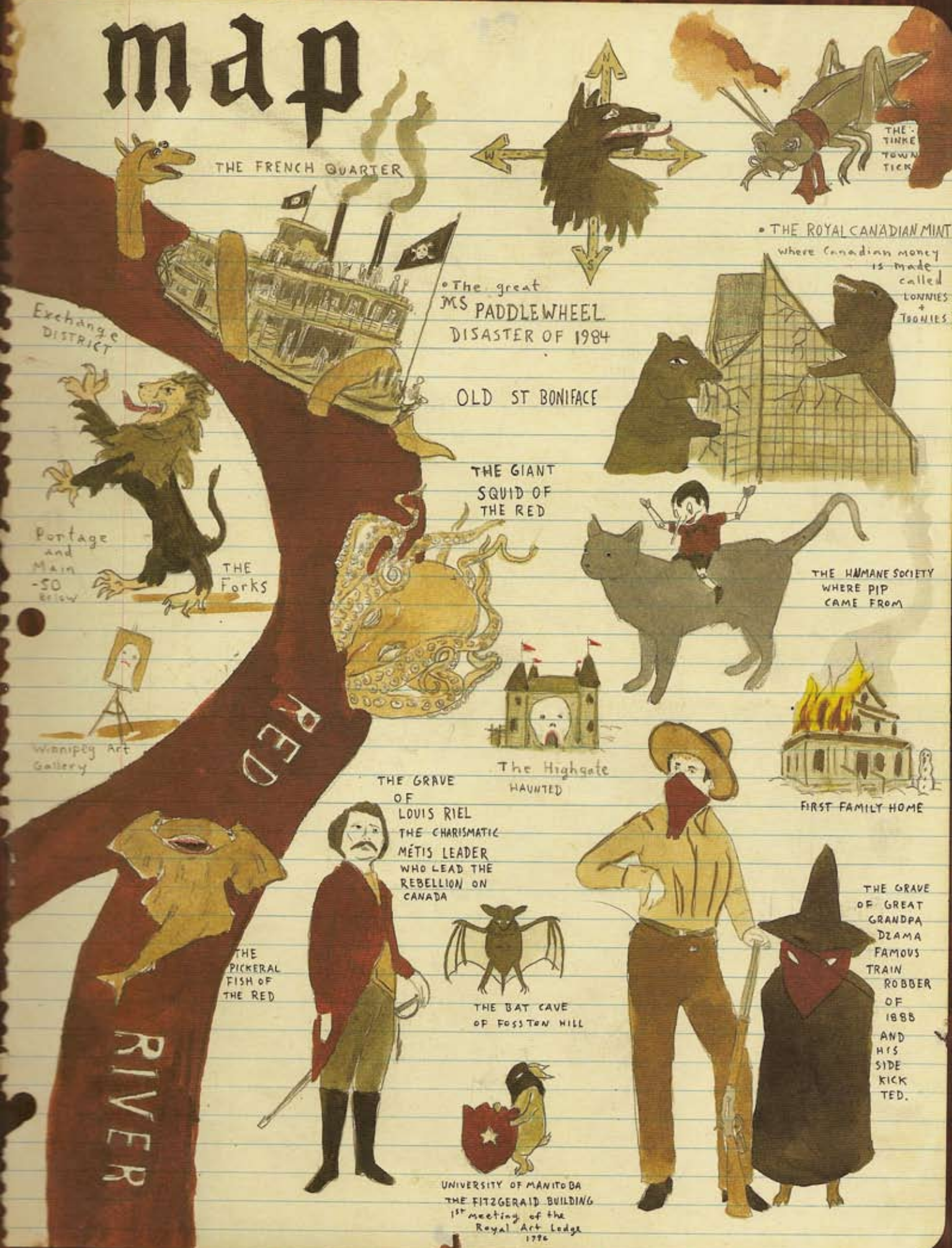


map



City Report: Winnipeg

Prairie Surrealism, paddlewheel disasters, endemic somnambulism, honeybee collaborations, hockey and hairdryers: more is going on in the Great White North than anyone suspected. Robert Enright and Guy Maddin report from the city supposedly chosen by the London *Times* four years running as 'the world capital of sorrow'.



Guy Maddin

Fiercely anti-careerist, or simply too sleepy to know what's good for him, Guy Maddin has down-gauged from shooting his feature films in 35mm to Super 8. The latest of these small format feature extravaganzas, The Brand Upon the Brain, will be finished by the end of 2006. He is currently working on a documentary about Winnipeg.

To those who fly over it, Winnipeg, the city of my birth, is a small charcoal smudge of a place upon the great white Canadian plains of snow, a city too easily overlooked, or forgotten completely. To me Winnipeg is a supernatural city of enchanted palimpsests, stories and memories piled one on top of the other. Some of these narratives were completely covered up by the time new histories were written over them; other stories bleed through and persist in being legible at all times. The narratives mix and mingle with all eras and confuse us Winnipeggers, who can never quite remember what year it is at any given time. Especially in winter, when the heavy load of darkness and fog confounds us most, we spend much of our waking time dreaming, and in our dreams we forget the cold, forget our sadness and losses. The hoary, sparkling darkness, strangely white with vast avenues and vaults of snow, is a great anaesthetic, an

Previous page:
Marcel Dzama
Map of Winnipeg
2006
Pencil and
watercolour on
paper
28 x 42 cm

Above:
A snowbound
Winnipeg streetcar
1927

intoxicant even. Winnipeg has a pathologically alarming rate of somnambulism – up to 250 times the normal rate for urban centres. Our streets are full of drowsy and forgetful wanderers, and the city is divided into the two worlds, almost indistinguishable, of the sleeping and the barely awake.

During our nightly peregrinations we citizens visit the cityscapes of both worlds. The people and buildings that were once here are now gone but are allowed to co-exist with those that are here still. We remember equally what happened today and long ago. Buildings long razed reappear; our cemeteries have an unstable population which rises and falls each night. Winnipeg is an extremely nostalgic city, probably because of its tendency openly to accept public sleepers and dreamers. By law Winnipeggers are permitted to visit any house they have ever lived in, no matter how long ago. When you vacate a flat or house in this

town, you keep your keys in case you need them while out in the night. People often shuffle into long vacated addresses, and the new occupants must accept them, although they're naturally not always happy about it. Sleepwalking visitors to old abodes are often completely disoriented by how much their homes have changed, by the presence of different furniture and trappings, but most make themselves comfortable in some way at least for the night.

Winnipeggers are also very forgetful and often repeat themselves without realizing it, and I don't mean just the things they say. Often they re-do things, just to be sure. A certain amount of repetition has made its way into acceptable public behaviour in the city. Ritual repetitions help people achieve certainty in life. In some cases Winnipeggers are considered rude when they don't repeat an action or a sentence at least a few times while out in society. To help Winnipeggers remember who they are with, they use scent as an *aide-memoire*. Just as they sleepwalk more than any other populace, Winnipeggers use more perfume than anyone else by far. Local *parfumeurs* create thousands of unique but cheap scents, which citizens liberally apply to themselves in the hope of penetrating each other's memories better through the more effective olfactory routes!

Even the architecture has an addled concept of itself. Emblematic of this is the Arlington Street Bridge, a vast span of frosted steel girders arching over the city's sprawling train yards, where trains couple in the fog, rumble on awhile, then noisily divorce. The bridge, manufactured some hundred years ago by the Vulcan Iron Works of London, was originally destined for Egypt, where it was to span the Nile, but a mistake in specs made the fit with that river impossible and the bridge was sold at a knock-down price to bargain-crazy Winnipeg. The bridge has not adjusted well to its always strapped foster home, and it often turns in its sleep – when it is possibly dreaming of the lush and joyous setting originally intended for it – and pops a girder out of place. The bridge is a bruised and trembling creature, dangerously unpredictable and frequently closed for repairs because of this unhappy provenance. Even the rail yards beneath the bridge have been unhappy since that day in 1913 when the ribbon was cut on the Panama Canal, really hitting Winnipeg right in the bread-basket with an event that rendered the northernmost transcontinental railway that much less useful to North Americans. The sounds that groan up from the yards at night sound like the agonies of some colossal arthritis.

The city possesses a vast network of back lanes, a gridwork of narrow under-acknowledged byways that hold a charm of their own. They're not even allowed on city maps, but the populace knows about them and uses them as much as the legitimate streets. A dispute between the city's two main taxi companies was settled by giving one company the right to use the regular streets, while the other company must pick up and drop off its fares only in the back lanes. (This back lane cab company augments its revenue by taking police officers as armed fares during heavy dragnets, and it's not uncommon to see these cars rumbling around



Left:
Guy Maddin
The Saddest Music in the World
2003
Film still

Above:
The view from Guy
Maddin's window
2006



with many gun barrels poking from the windows.) These unlit back lanes are where the real Winnipeg is found, where memories come most plausibly alive, where horses still go sledding and junkmen still shout out their wares.

The network of these lanes suggests the grid of another city laid right on top of the first and more familiar grid made by its legitimate streets. But this transparent map

of the second-rate public roads sits slightly askew on the city, a canted version of things, streets with secret names or names remembered only in slang, unofficially suggesting things best not discussed, shameful or not quite correctly remembered. The back lanes receive the breech ends of the houses, a side of the home not meant for the public. These narrow, rutted byways are the conduits of refuse removal but, more importantly, are

the recipient weedy landscapes of shameful abandonment: people as junk (or junk collectors); mattresses bent over with fatal stains; odd tableaux of the unwanted or overlooked; bales of sticks sitting like family members on a wet sofa; a computer keyboard on an oily plank; burnt-out briquettes on a slushy cardboard box; tea-bags in piebald snow; sexual surrender and degradation in dim garages, the *garagistas*! Sometimes one finds oneself driving or strolling in a back lane and can't resist the impulse to take the numerous branch lines of this vast transportation system as far as they will take you, all the way downtown and back out to the vacant lots of the suburbs; other times you're frightened or uncharmed and can't get back onto the main streets quickly enough!

At our Sherbrook Pool I am a volunteer life-saving instructor. It is extremely dark and musty, a grand structure built as a public works project during the Depression, which still exhales the gritty, sooty breath of the Dustbowl years. It's also the only public pool in the world to be built on three subterranean levels, with a pool on each, like an underground parking lot with swimmers instead of cars. On the first level, the one closest to our streets, swimming is mixed and free. One floor down, only girls swim, and



Top:
Janet Cardiff and
George Bures Miller
The Paradise Institute
2001
DVD still

Above:
'Lil's Beauty Shop,
my childhood home.
I'm allowed back
there whenever I
like.'

Right:
'The retired show-biz chimp
we hired for my fourth
birthday. That's me about to
get punched by the cranky
simian while my mom
smokes and admires. The
chimp had earlier gotten
tanked when it downed
a lost highball in one
draught.'



on the deepest level, only the boys. I teach a class to the kids at the mixed level – the giggling adolescents practise mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on each other. On the middle level it is I who demonstrate the proper technique on the eager young girls who feign for me their drownings at poolside. On the deepest level, at fathomage where no sun ever ricochets, I impart my 'life-giving' breath exclusively to young boys. These three pools and the changing rooms for each also serve as air-raid shelters during our frequent civic safety drills in downtown Winnipeg. There is no real need for these drills any longer, but having forgotten why we had them in the first place, we keep them up, partially to honour our rote way of life,

partly just to be on the safe side.

In this delirious metropolis is the delicate machinery of a Winnipegger's memory put off somehow because of our nearness to the magnetic North Pole? Or are we who are afflicted with such long winters like the sufferers of illness who can no longer remember what good health feels like, or summer either? A strange species of memory enables us to live here; and we have a need to forget. Are transitoriness and oblivion the fate that awaits all that lives? What is the use of living when the wind obliterates our footsteps directly we have gone by? This is a universal question, one that any citizen of the world might ask.

Robert Enright

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Crossings*.

In January the Guggenheim Museum in New York finalized the purchase of a major installation by Winnipeg-based photographer Sarah Anne Johnson. Titled *Treeplanting* (2003), it included a combination of over 70 photographs: some documentary and others in which the landscapes and figures were fashioned from 'Sculpti'. The photographs were taken in northern Manitoba, where Johnson and hundreds of other university students, enveloped by intense heat and clouds of mosquitoes, planted small trees, one by one, in order to make enough money to cover tuition and living expenses for the upcoming year.

Hard work describes both Johnson's subject and the method she used to secure it in the first place. A similar approach characterizes much of the art that has come out of Winnipeg, a city of 670,000 inhabitants situated roughly in the centre of the North American continent. Winnipeg is 500 miles from any Canadian city of significant size and is the same distance from Minneapolis-St Paul, the closest major urban hub on the American side of the 49th Parallel. The effect of this spatial (and psychological) apartness has been for the founding citizens to feel compelled to build their own culture. As a result, Winnipeg has some of the oldest cultural institutions in the country. The Royal Winnipeg Ballet was founded in 1939 and is the longest continuously operating ballet company in North America; the Contemporary Dancers is the country's first modern dance company; the Manitoba Theatre Center was the prototype for the regional theatres that subsequently proliferated all over Canada; and the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1947. Fifteen years ago the WSO also established the New Music Festival, for which pre-eminent contemporary composers such as John Corigliano, Louis Andriessen and Gavin Bryars travel to Winnipeg during the coldest month of the winter and indulge in a ten-day riot of musical performance.

This institutional activity has been paralleled by the development of artist-run centres and organizations in which groups of artists have formed strategic alliances. Winnipeg has separate umbrella organizations for photography (The Floating Gallery/Platform), video (Video Pool) and film (Winnipeg Film Group). Plug In ICA, the city's most significant contemporary art gallery (which began 34 years ago, taking its name from Archigram's notion of the interconnected city), was awarded a special jury prize at the 2001 Venice Biennale for *The Paradise Institute* (2001), by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, the only time this has happened in Canada's lengthy involvement with the Biennale. Finally, *Border Crossings*, 'a local, international magazine of art and culture' in the words of its editor, Meeka Walsh, has published from Winnipeg without interruption for 25 years.

This partial inventory of cultural achievement indicates how thoroughly the idea and practice of art-making have rooted

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Guy Maddin

themselves in the city. Ironically, while the culture thrived, what failed to materialize was the economic prosperity envisioned at the turn of the 19th century. (Winnipeg's phenomenal growth earned it the nickname 'the Chicago of the North'.) In 2003 Guy Maddin set his feature film *The Saddest Music in the World* in Depression-era Winnipeg, a city allegedly chosen by the *London Times* four years in a row as 'the world capital of sorrow'. Shawna Dempsey, whose 16-year collaboration with Lorri Millan in performance and film has been brilliantly subversive (as Lesbian Park Rangers they have performed in the USA and Australia), argues that 'in some ways we are a dying, decaying city'. Dempsey and Millan are also Adjunct Curators at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and their exhibition of 29 young artists 'Supernovas' opened at the WAG in January. 'Our artists often work with found materials that reflect this sense of impoverishment, but the hope and the playfulness in the work is just amazing.' Cliff Eyland, an artist, gallery director and critic, characterizes the dominant aesthetic among a younger generation of artists as 'do-it-yourself, low-tech post-Punk'. What's interesting is that an appreciation of this jerry-rigged aesthetic isn't confined to the under-30 set. Ken Gregory, a sculptor and sound artist who has performed all over the world, also makes kinetic sculptures out of the discards of computer culture. His objects speak to a heartbreaking vulnerability in our culture, and the recent purchase of his work by the National Gallery of Canada will guarantee that many Canadians will have the opportunity to react to his careful sonic interventions.

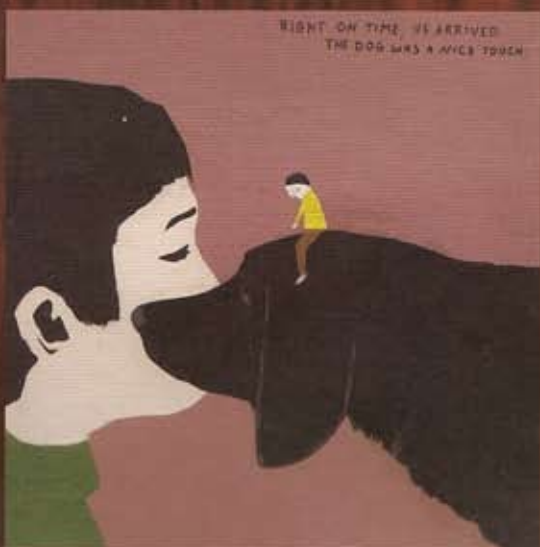
It is the paradoxical relationship between aesthetic success and mercantile failure that has made it possible for so many artists to live and work in Winnipeg. Photographers such as William Eakin and Diana Thorneycroft, for example, can afford studios in the city that would be impossible in any city of comparable size. So there is space and there is cold, and the two are integrally connected. 'You have to be tough to be here', says Thorneycroft. 'It's dark and the winters last for ever, so we go inside - inside our homes, our bodies and our heads.' An earlier generation of artists - Ivan Eyre, Esther Warkov and Don Proch, all of whom have done significant work in the medium of drawing - transformed this interior view into a species of prairie Surrealism. John Newlove has a line in one of his prairie poems: 'everyone is so lonely/ in this country/ that it's neces-

sary to be fantastic.' There is a discernible trace of that psychic unease in the work of a younger generation of artists. The most conspicuous among them is the Royal Art Lodge, founded in 1996, when all but one of the seven founder members were students at the University of Manitoba. (The youngest, Hollie Dzama, who was then 12 years old, is the sister of Marcel, today the best-known and most prolific of the core group.) It was in Winnipeg that Michael Dumontier, Drue Langlois, Adrian Williams, Jon Pylypchuk, Neil Farber and Marcel Dzama began the various collaborations (in music, video, doll-making and, especially, drawing) that propelled the Royal Art Lodge into the

international art world. By the time their survey exhibition 'Ask the Dust' opened in 2003 at The Drawing Center in New York and began its extended tour, the original Art Lodge membership had been significantly reduced. But what the show made clear, in its different incarnations in Toronto and Middleburg, in the Netherlands, was that the artists maintained in their solo careers, and in the new associations that opened up as the RAL evolved, the madcap meandering and menacing that energized their collaborative work. The energy came directly out of the same conditions that could be so punishing. 'It's cold and you're in the middle of nowhere, but the isolation gives you lots



Shawna Dempsey and
Lorri Millan
Lesbian Park Rangers
1997
Photograph



Above:
The Royal Art Lodge
Untitled
2005
Mixed media on panel
15x15 cm

Top:
Sarah Anne Johnson
Guy and Jess
From the series
'Treeplanting'
2003
Photograph

of freedom', says Adrian Williams, who was the first member of the Lodge to leave when he moved to Montreal in 1997. 'You're not beholden to anyone for the responsibility to be a capital "A" artist, so it's pretty liberating.'

In the same building at the University of Manitoba where the RAL began their artful lodging other artists took advantage of the cold in a different way. Tim Gardner moved with his family to Winnipeg from Ontario in his last year of high school, and five years later moved on to Columbia's MFA programme. He says, 'I have fond memories of Winnipeg. It was a beginning and an ending for me, figuring out who I was. I just met the right kind of people, who helped me get creative.' His camaraderie with Pylypchuk and Karel Funk began in a converted barn at the university. 'The painting barn was this creative incubation chamber', Gardner recalls. 'I think it had to do with the weather; it was so isolated and no authority figures would ever come around outside of class time, so we had free rein of the place. We went nuts in the barn and got really competitive in a friendly way. It was just such a positive atmosphere for working.'

Every Winnipeg artist comments on the

freedom from competition that characterizes the city, even though a disproportionate number of successful artists continue to live here. Painters Wanda Koop, Eleanor Bond and sculptor Aganetha Dyck are mid-career artists who have exhibited throughout Canada and Europe. Dyck's sculptures and drawings are the result of her collaboration with bees. Bond and Koop share a compelling virtuosity. Koop gets so much emotional clout from marks that seem almost not there that you're inclined to think she has made a pact with a painterly devil. (Don Reichert, a painter who has recently focused his attention on photography, also makes paintings that are simultaneously dazzling and elegant.) These are artists who are the weight and ballast in a disparate community of artists.

A group of dedicated teachers at the school of art and professional artists in the community have been instrumental in advising and inspiring a generation of students who have achieved levels of commercial success never enjoyed by the mentors. But the inter-generational sniping and bitterness that seem endemic to the art world simply don't operate in Winnipeg. In Cliff Eyland's estimation, 'there is a certain lack of cynicism and irony here'. It is assuredly not a Utopia (there have been as many dreadful professors at the university as inspiring ones and, sadly, that situation continues), but what is consistent is a recognized level of mutual respect.

One of the areas where that respect is made manifest is in the large number of collaborations among Winnipeg artists. It's as if getting together with other artists is an antidote to the inhospitable nature of the climate. The Royal Art Lodge is the best-known group of its kind, but a fluctuating assembly of ten women from various disciplines formed The Ladies of the Standard Movie Theatre. Their project was to build a 24-seat cinema in an ornate Vaudevillian style in which they could show local films. To raise money for its construction they organized tea parties, fundraisers and Sunday craft nights. Shawna McLeod was a member. 'Within the crop of Winnipeg collectives it was singular in its anonymity. That was part of the mandate. Everything was collaborative, and it was important that it not be about one member or any kind of personality.' After about a year the theatre as built was dismantled, and the Ladies ceased to operate. 'It was more about friendship,' McLeod says, 'and it was nice to have a project.'

Much noisier in both identity and activity are The Abzurbz, a group of nine artists – part Dada, part carnival and part brat pack – who perform often raucous interventions around the city. William Eakin is a member, as are Cliff Eyland and Dominique Rey, an artist who is as comfortable with a paintbrush as with a video camera. The Abzurbz are 'performance terrorists, in that some people are offended by us', says Rey. 'We get all kinds of reaction. We mess up the whole relationship between audience and artist.' No one knows where, or when, the Abzurbz will turn up next.

The 26ers – or Two-Sixes – are a group of eight graffiti artists who have a more directly political edge to their work. 'Party Bike Nail Bombing', for example, involved a bicycle ride and a few drinks, after which they rode to the Exchange district of Winnipeg and nailed examples of their graffiti art onto telephone poles and buildings.

The Winnipeg artist who is most enthralled to a collaborative process is Paul Butler, an artist, gallery owner and, in 1998, the originator of the Collage Party, an aesthetic get-together where invited artists make collages out of magazines supplied wherever the Party occurs. (He has organized them in New York, Berlin, London, Toronto and Vancouver). Butler, who will also have a one-person show at White Columns in late June of work produced at previous Parties, is the owner of the other gallery, a gallery that occupies no permanent space. For Butler, Winnipeg is the ideal point of departure. Studios are readily available and reasonably priced, and the city is situated in an advanta-



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Robert Enright

geous geographical location. 'That's why Winnipeg is a telemarketing centre. We've accepted that people aren't going to come to us, and we're not going to wait for them to come, so we just get on a plane and go visit. We can exist in multiple art scenes just by travelling around.' Butler's buoyant sense of the future and what Winnipeg artists can do to turn the city's natural isolation to its advantage is what the next generation will face. Among the artists Butler exhibits are a number of Winnipeggers – Simon Hughes, Daniel Dueck, Perry Thompson, Bonnie Marin, Kim Oullette and Craig Love.

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of place in the formation of the city and the artists it has produced. Location is a litmus test in the quest for an identity that seems so ubiquitous in this country. Northrop Frye's economical interrogation is exactly right. Frye said that we ask the wrong question when we say, 'who am I?'. If you ask instead, 'where is here?', then identity will follow from place with the inescapable efficiency with which form follows from function.

The answer, of course, is that here in Winnipeg it is cold and isolated. Sarah Anne Johnson talks about the necessity of staying in her apartment for six months, saying 'In the winter there's not a lot to do and so it forces you to be more creative with how you spend your time and your imagination ... Also, it has something to do with the fact that it's so flat. It's just full of nothing, and nothing is full of possibility.'

Above:
Jasmine Jissom
(aka William Eakin)
The Absurbs 8/16/05
2005
Photograph

Right:
Cliff Eyland
Girl
2004
Hand-made TIFF file
13x8 cm

