

University of Regina Centre

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GREG BEATTY

In the recently completed University of Regina Centre, an effort was made to ameliorate this aesthetic injustice by integrating commissioned art works into the building's fabric. "The process began with a public meeting for artists in November 1995," recalls Regina sculptor Lorne Beug. "We were provided with information on design parameters like floor layout and building materials. Out of that meeting, sixty artists made 140 proposals to an eight person committee composed of the architect,

interior designer and representatives from the university administration, student union and local art community. Eight artists were invited to make more detailed Stage II proposals. Ultimately, myself, Jacqueline Berting and Richard Gorenko were awarded commissions."

Beug's successful proposal took the form of a ceramic floor tile «mural». Initially, the work was to be located in the Centre's main foyer, but a decision was later made to extend it along two corridors connecting the Centre to adjacent buildings. This necessitated a revision in Beug's design to accommodate the expansion. Overall, the «mural» covers 930 square metres, and is composed of square clay tiles manufactured in Italy.

In conceptual terms, the «mural» is intended to represent an aerial view of the prairie landscape. Interspersed within the grid pattern, which recalls the sectional division of Saskatchewan by 19th Century surveyors, and the patchwork quilt of light-coloured cropland and darker patches of summerfallow, are stylized depictions of current Regina architectural

landmarks. Through additional references to Regina's pre-settlement significance as a sacred buffalo kill-site for Plains Indians (a crossed-bone motif, which recalls the Aboriginal practice of planting buffalo bones in the ground to ensure the animal's plenitude), and the insertion of eight mosaics offering «digitized» views of the landscape (which emphasizes the extent to which our experience of nature is mediated by technology), Beug extends the temporal reach of his «mural» to include both the past and future.

Unlike traditional studio work, where the artist enjoys virtually unlimited autonomy, this type of public art project demands extensive collaboration. During different phases of the «mural»'s conception and execution, Beug consulted with the architect, interior designer, university administration and the tile contractor. There were also practical matters to consider, such as ease of maintenance, and the provincial building code, a mandated need for clearly delineated markings on ramps to signal changes in elevation.

Not many artists, I suspect, create work with the knowledge that it will be walked on by the general public. At floor level, this creates the sensation (reinforced by the moderately uneven tile surface) of moving through the landscape. Viewing the mural from the University Centre's mezzanine offers a second perspective, that of an airplane passenger flying over the province. In fact, there are even a couple of airplane-shaped shadows incorporated into the design. This perceptual shift allows viewers to better appreciate the three-dimensional quality of Beug's tile imagery.

Because of the mural's massive scale, Beug was unable to test his design in studio. Instead, he had to visualize the various components in his mind with only construction paper models to guide him. Installation of the tiles was done

It is the rare public building that does not incorporate art into its interior design. But usually this is done as an afterthought once construction is complete. Thus, the art is not always shown to its best advantage.

N.-S. Axis, ceramic tile floor designed by Lorne Beug, University Centre Complex, University of Regina.

according to a detailed floorplan. With a range of earth-tone colours, the tiles were reasonably effective at evoking the landscape. But I wasn't impressed with the several meandering rivers Beug included in his design. Like the mosaics, they were composed of shiny inch-square tiles. Laid two abreast, they were far too uniform and, in comparison with the vastness of the surrounding tile landscape, insubstantial, to suggest true rivers.

Jacqueline Berting is best-known for *The Glass Wheat Field- A Salute to Canadian Farmers* (1995) which consists of 14,000 individually crafted stalks of glass wheat. In her University Centre commission, she used her expertise in this media to create 200 tablets that adorn the tops of partitions in the food court. As a sculptor, Berting is attracted to glass because of the unique properties it possesses. When molten, it is fluid and flexible. But once it hardens, it has a rigid permanence.

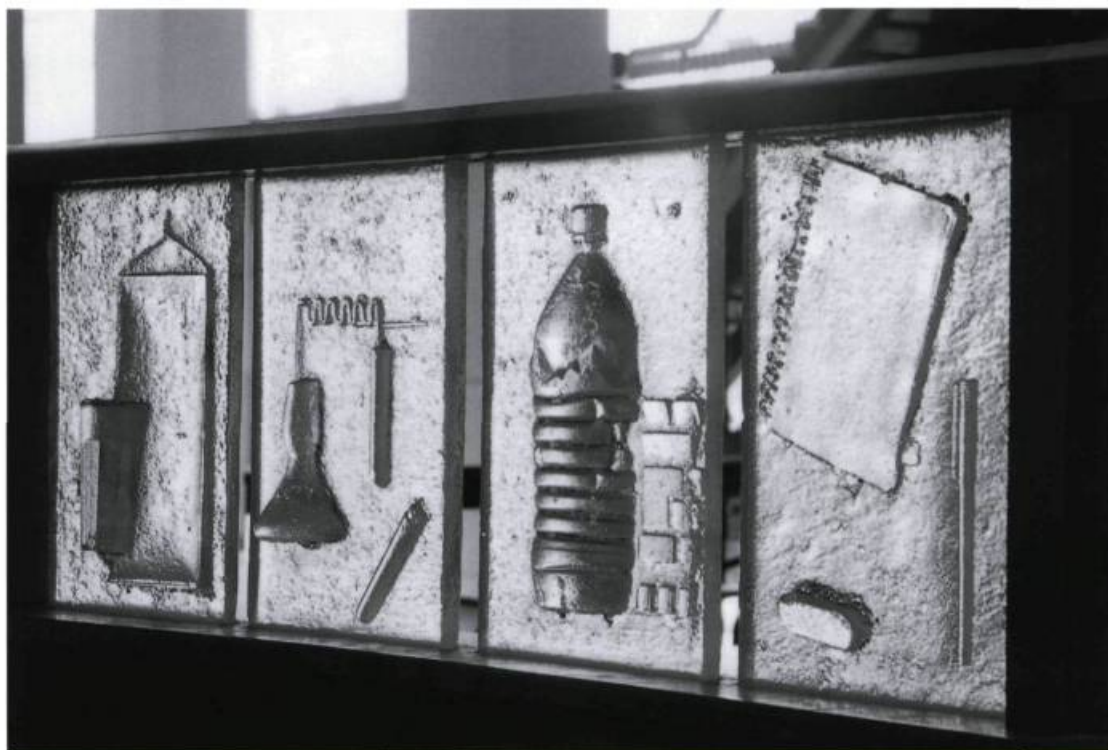
In fashioning her 20 x 30 cm tablets, Berting impressed a variety of objects into a sand mold. She then ladled liquid Gabr Cullet glass into the mold, creating a three-dimensional impression. After separating the hot glass from the mold, she placed the tablets in a kiln for twenty-four hours to slowly cool them to room temperature to avoid cracking. The sand adds an interesting stippled texture to the glass. Approximately two cm thick, the translucent tablets promote the distribution of light. In selecting the impressed objects, Berting sought to reference the academic, athletic, and social aspects of university life. The objects include an old-fashioned pencil sharpener, calculator, telephone, pen and notepad, badminton birdie, molecular model, ice skate, and computer keyboard and mouse. Other tablets, such as those containing impressions of a violin, paint tubes and brush, and masks of comedy and tragedy, refer specifically to the Centre's primary tenant — the University of Regina's Fine Arts Department. The remaining tablets feature foodstuffs such as peppers, pears, corn, mushrooms and carrots, whose nutritional value stands in stark contrast to the greasy franchise fare found in the food court.

In metaphorical terms, the glass recalls the university students themselves. Still in the process of establishing their adult identity, they are potentially fragile, but with a tempered inner strength that arises both from their life experience thus far, and from their association with other students. Each tablet, like each student, is unique in its own special way. In a political context, the glass also serves as a metaphor for the current precarious state of Canadian universities, where such

sacred principles as academic freedom and access are being jeopardized by government cut-backs, double-digit tuition increases, and ideologically-motivated attacks on scholarly research.

Indeed, both Berting and Beug found themselves chafing under restrictions placed on them by the university administration. In Beug's case, he was actually ordered to remove an icon — an outdated university logo — from his design. Berting, in contrast, was required to

relief «carvings» that employ a similar vocabulary of reductive images- dogs, trees, clouds, stars. Installed on the outside wall by the Centre's main entrance, the reliefs are framed by irregularly-shaped borders that strengthen their visual impact. The differentiation between figure and ground is further enhanced by a tonal contrast in the pre-cast concrete used to construct the wall. While the reliefs function independently, they can also be read as a group, creating a disjointed land-



submit a list of objects she intended to replicate in glass. I suppose there was a slight possibility she may have inadvertently chosen an object that would have offended some individual or group on campus. Such a risk is inherent in public art, however, and cannot be used as an excuse to compromise the principle of artistic freedom. In concluding my discussion of Berting's piece, I would note that some tablets were contaminated by sand residue from the casting process. While the grit was an effective reminder of the glass's organic nature, it was incompatible with the food court's hygienic atmosphere.

The final commissioned artist is Richard Gorenko of Calgary, who is best-known for his quirky line drawings, incised in wood, of familiar Canadian icons such as geese, moose and rail lines. By stripping his images of pictorial detail, Gorenko weakens the tautological relationship between «signifier» and «signified». Once this relationship is severed, we are left with generic images that function as universally recognizable signs or symbols. Here, he presents fourteen bas-

scape where elements are arranged in horizontal layers according to their place in nature.

As I noted in my introduction, the practice of involving artists in the early stages of a building's design is relatively new. While the process adopted by the U of R was far from perfect, both Beug and Berting described it as a step in the right direction. Given that the Centre was built to house the Fine Arts Department, it is difficult to imagine a better venue from an artistic viewpoint. The true test will come when an attempt is made to integrate art into the fabric of a commercial building. I'm also curious to see how university staff and students will treat the art works in the months and years to come. When I visited the Centre to interview Berting, I noted that planters had been mounted on two of the partitions. By interfering with the interplay between the glass and light (both natural and artificial), the plants diminished the prismatic quality of the affected tablet sections. Hopefully, similar aesthetic indignities will not be inflicted on the other commissioned art works. ■

Jacqueline Berting, *Untitled*, Details. Glass, sand cast. 200 panels 30,48 x 20,32 cm. University Centre Complex, University of Regina. Photo: Rhea Photography.