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Andrew van Schie: *Dead Men Frozen in Ice*

GIL McELROY

Lake Nipissing is a large, shallow body of water in northern Ontario best known, perhaps, for having been part of the route Samuel de Champlain and the voyageurs used on their way into the heart of the continent. More recently, it's become a recreational area for the city of North Bay and environs. It's noted for its fishing, and for the vessel — the *Chief Commanda II* — that plys its waters during the summer months loaded with tourists. In the winter, it's dotted with ice fishing huts and criss-crossed with snowmobile trails.

Over the course of the last two winters, Dermot Wilson, Director of the W.K.P. Kennedy Gallery in the city, has used the frozen surface of the lake as the site for exhibitions. In 2004, it was *Ice Follies*, comprising a series of ice huts designed by area and national artists. And in 2005, it was *Dead Men Frozen in Ice*, a work by North Bay artist Andrew van Schie.

The concept was simple enough: build a ten-meter high column of blocks of ice cut directly from Lake Nipissing, and entomb within it three life-size wooden figures that would later be retrieved when the lake thawed and the column consequently collapsed. So over the course of a weekend in late February, van Schie and dozens of volunteer assistants set to work. Clearing a section of ice just offshore from a popular lakefront park, ice blocks were cut, scaffolding erected, and a portable conveyor belt, usually used for moving and stacking bales of hay, was brought in and put into service getting the ice blocks up to the height they were needed as the column rose. Gaps between blocks were stuffed with snow, and water was added to freeze things up as necessary. At intervals, the wooden figures — clad in canvas and wrapped with twine — were inserted into the column.

In the end, it didn't turn out quite as had been planned. Concerns arose about the ability of the lake ice to support the weight of the column, and so it never quite reached its anticipated height.

Consequently, it was only able to house two of the three planned figures, and a smaller column was therefore constructed nearby specifically for the entombment of the third figure.

And instead of what had been planned as a modernist column of ice — a tall, rectangular shape of clean, uninterrupted lines and 90 degree angles — we were given something with more of a post-modern sensibility, something with ornament and figuration. Protruding from the flat top of the column was the head of one of the wooden figures, like a sentinel keeping watch over the nearby junior column (out of which stuck its very own figurehead), the lake, the shoreline park, and adjacent city. The tomb that the ice column was originally intended to be evolved into something very different.

Through March and into early April the columns decayed, the ice blocks melting in warm sunshine only to refreeze at night, eventually tumbling down as the ice rotted to reveal the secrets within. By late March, one figure had fallen entirely from out of the column to lie prone and inert on the lake ice, while its companion — the sentinel figure — held fast as best it could in the sculptural remnants of the work. By early April, the collapse was total.

Now, something very personal comes into play for me at this point. It has to do with the summer of 1972, when, as a teenager, I worked aboard the *Chief Commanda I*, cleaning it before it left for the day's cruise. I was on the job very early one summer morning when an Ontario Provincial Police boat was hurriedly called out onto the lake, and was there when it returned several hours later to the dock with two bodies retrieved from the lake. They had, as it turned out, been there since the winter, when, having robbed a convenience store at gunpoint, two young men decided to make their getaway by cleverly driving out across the ice of the lake. They hit a thin spot, went through, and drowned, terribly alone in the cold and darkness, their bodies only finally



revealed and recovered following the thaw of the lake's winter ice cover.

So beyond any ice-bound allusions Andrew van Schie's *Dead Men Frozen in Ice* might make, say, to a tragic event like the ill-fated Franklin Expedition to the Canadian Arctic in the 19th century and to that young crewman whose body was exhumed from its lonely grave by scientist a number of years ago, studied, photographed, and reburied; outside of any discussion of the potential aesthetic interplay

between modernism and its rebellious progeny, there is the persistence, for me, of a disturbing memory.

I see dead people. ←

Andrew van Schie,
Dead Men Frozen in Ice
W.K.P. Kennedy Gallery,
North Bay, Ontario
February 26–April 7, 2005

Gil McELROY is a poet, independent curator, and critic. He is the author of *Gravity & Grace: Selected Writings on Contemporary Canadian Art*.

Andrew van SCHIE,
Dead Men Frozen in Ice, 2005. Ice, canvas, styrofoam, solar-powered lights, wood. Two columns: 214 x 214 x 579 cm, and 214 x 214 x 244 cm. Photo: Andrew Van Schie.