Espace Sculpture

Heather Benning: *Field Doll*

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Picture yourself in a car traversing the vast expanse of rural Saskatchewan. Grid road or major highway, it doesn’t matter. You’re driving along, and on a whim you decide to pull over and visit one of the abandoned farmyards that dot the countryside. Stripped of paint, with windows broken and doors kicked in, the house stands as a silent sentinel to a bygone way of life. As you wander through the yard, you discover a child’s doll lying on its side, its bright blue eyes staring blindly ahead. Pretty poignant metaphor for the rural depopulation that has occurred throughout the prairies in recent decades, eh?

But what if the doll was 12-feet tall? That would put a different spin on things. Oh, the doll would still evoke thoughts of childhood innocence and families being uprooted by socio-economic forces beyond their control. But its sheer size, in an artistic context anyway, could also be interpreted as a comment on the scale of modern agriculture, where farmers, with the aid of massive tractors and combines costing hundreds of thousands of dollars, cultivate tens of thousands of acres, and intensive cattle and hog operations abound.

Quite apart from their socio-economic impact, these mega-farms are also proving to be problematic from an environmental perspective. Intensive mono-cropping of wheat and other grains is stripping the soil of much-needed nutrients, and diminishing biodiversity in the ecosystem, while large-scale cattle and hog operations produce an enormous amount of manure and other waste — kind of like Benning’s doll would, if it was actually alive and peeing/pooping/farting/belching.

Benning’s family stopped farming in 1998 around the time she graduated from high school. Holding a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, she is currently completing an MFA in Sculpture at the Edinburgh College of Art & Design in Scotland. In discussing Field Doll with me, she insisted the show wasn’t intended to serve as a heart-felt plea for Saskatchewan to return to its bucolic roots as a haven for family farms and a rural-oriented lifestyle. True, in one of the dollhouse photos, a rainbow can be seen arcing behind the house, but, as a certain adage reminds us, those who lament the waning vitality of rural Saskatchewan might regard the rainbow as a sign that better days lie ahead.

Born and raised on a farm near the town of Humboldt in north-central Saskatchewan, Heather Benning is well-aquainted with the evolving nature of rural life. Driven by mechanization and globalization, the number of family farms in Benning’s home province has plummeted from a high of 142,391 in the late 1920s to roughly 50,000 today. Fewer farms mean fewer potential customers for businesses in nearby towns and villages. Fewer businesses mean fewer off-farm jobs, less tax revenue for municipalities, and ultimately, the closure of schools, hospitals, skating rinks, post offices and other amenities that help sustain a community.

In 2007, while in the midst of an 18-month residency in Redvers in east-central Saskatchewan, Benning created a work called Dollhouse where she cut away one wall of a deserted two-story farm house in the area and painstakingly restored its interior to give it a late 1960s feel — which was when the house was actually abandoned by the family that had once inhabited it. In the two photographs of the house that curator Jeff Nye has included in this exhibition, an old pair of black-and-brown CCM skates can be seen hanging from a hook by the back door. And a reproduction of Gainsborough’s famous Blue Boy graces — if that’s the right word — the living room wall. At night, functioning lamps and other lights illuminated the interior. Unlike a real dollhouse, though, where it’s possible for a person to reach in and play with the contents, Benning’s house was scaled with sheets of Plexiglas. That gave it the air of a museum or heritage site. A feeling she reinforced by hanging a stopped clock on the kitchen wall.

In 2008, Benning followed up that project by fabricating a giant baby doll based on a toy she remembers having as a girl. In proportional terms, her sculpture is precisely 12 times larger than the toy doll, with a detachable head cast out of acrylic resin and a cloth body stuffed with foam chips and styrofoam. It was on display in the gallery, along with a photo of the doll lying in a field beside a decrepit barn apropos of the scenario described above. The photo was taken in winter, so the doll has a light dusting of snow on it.

In a gallery setting, the doll, with its generic facial features, moulded hair and stump-like hands, does convey an air of menace. Truly, it is a giant in comparison with the mere mortals who gaze upon it. Given the vastness of the prairie landscape that surrounds it in the photograph, the doll appears to fit more naturally. But its sheer size, in an artistic context anyway, could also be interpreted as a comment on the scale of modern agriculture, where farmers, with the aid of massive tractors and combines costing hundreds of thousands of dollars, cultivate tens of thousands of acres, and intensive cattle and hog operations abound.