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Concerns and References

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MONTRÉAL

CONCERNS AND REFERENCES

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Yuristy's art is a daily ritual. A month's vacation in France and Belgium with his family becomes a giant calendar of twenty one woodcuts made on location from Antwerp via Rouen to the Côte d'Azur, reassembled together in his studio in a large woodcut print on return to his Ottawa studio. Diversity has always been a large part of Yuristy's work. The Montréal exhibition coincides with his building of an eighty-foot diameter wooden sculpture on the grounds of Ottawa's City Hall; a thirty-foot mural from the Salmon series hangs inside.

Russell Yuristy was best known in Western Canada before his move to Ottawa in 1986. The transition period from the prairies opened up a period of referential work and led to the *Salmon series* in painting,

painted wood sculpture, prints and woodcuts. The referential work relates to previous influences from

Regina and Silton in South

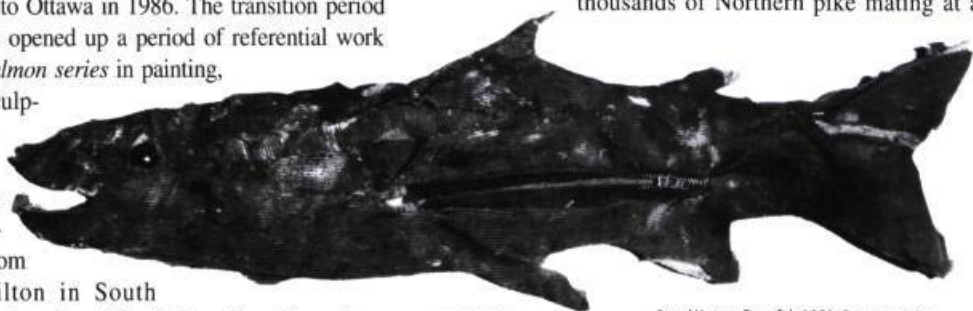
Saskatchewan on the edge of the Qu'appelle valley, where his converted church studio looked out over the grasslands of the glacially carved vista. Yuristy was raised in the end of the Great Depression era in the Ukrainian farming community of Goodeve and a major painting in Regina's Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery collection from 1985 titled "Life and death Matters", reflects that reality and history.

During a second populist mandate, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation government of Saskatchewan, in collaboration with artists, created the first arts council in North America in 1948. It was based on the British Arts Council and became the subsequent model for the Canada Council established in 1957. By the 1950s, this experiment was being reported in the *New York Times*, and attracting the attention of artists such as Barnett Newman and critic Clement Greenberg who then wrote that Canada had four art centres: Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver and Regina. In the sixties a counter movement emerged partly through the influence of the new ceramic movement exemplified by Joe Fafard and Russ Yuristy.

"I was ready to move; we had two kids, my wife was from Ottawa and wanted to get back East. Moving here sort of jolted me. I had been getting too comfortable up to the eighties, and then Grant Devine came in to privatize the economy and undo the social and cultural fabric and from what I could see it was going from bad back to worse. Yet for some time it had been good. In the end, in

some ways I adjusted to Ottawa more quickly than I would have thought; not knowing other artists gave me time to get a lot of work done.

"I had always rejected the idea of regionalism while working in Saskatchewan. We considered ourselves as dealing with our environment. The Pop movement in New York reflected theirs and the Abstract movement echoed the theories of Greenberg. We just chose to be somewhere else and to try keeping theory out of it too much and to deal with it on our own terms. The result was a Paris exhibition in 1973 at Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris. "I once remember being in Northern Manitoba, seeing thousands of Northern pike mating at a



Russell Yuristy, *Zipperfish*, 1991. Peinture sur tissu et contre-plaqué, fermeture-éclair; 18 x 58.3 cm.

narrow passage between

two lakes, being amazed at them holding their own in the water. I've never forgotten that. This became a symbol for me of the power and forces of nature.

"The fish I'm painting in this mural are swimming in a pool of thinner paint I've mixed up; there is that feeling of continual struggle between figure, field and foreground. Painting water, rather than just a background of brown or red; not just a ground, but fish near a surface and becoming interchangeable, so there is no longer that conflict. That whole thing to do with colour field opposed to abstraction. Greenberg said that the canvas is flat, but I think you can try to poke little holes into it, as long as you keep the references to frontal planes and suggest deeper spaces. Greenberg is a great critic, and I think it would do Canada good to have someone as tough as him, but at the same time he was carving out a niche for himself, saying stay flat, stay flat and having painters painting out his theories. Pollock was the perfect sort of cowboy image whipping out these lariats of paint. Greenberg was a Marxist and saw history that way. Painting had to be flat because he said we can paint as good as Europe; fuck Europe, we can paint better." Through focus on the image and a continual eye to the concerns of the environment, Russell Yuristy has adapted to and represented contemporary concerns in Canadian art today.

MIKE MOLTER