

De Angelus
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Waterloo Region is an area in transition. Located an hour west of Toronto it is far enough away to have its own distinctive ambience but close enough to be an increasingly popular destination for commuters to the city. Its history is mixed. With the Mennonite settlements of the mid and late 19th century, the region retains its ties to agriculture and traditional farming methods and lifestyles. Yet, particularly in Kitchener, factories and industries have provided the means of making a living for many of its residents for well over a century.



Michael J. AMBEDIAN, *De Angelus*, 2005. Sawdust and carpenter's glue. Each figure approx 5' 8" tall. Photo: Mike.

This juxtaposition between agrarian and industrial lifestyles is a distinctive aspect of the area — though not without the occasional conflict, however. The renowned “Kitchener Farmers’ Market” is now known as “Your Kitchener Market” — ostensibly denying any link to the agrarian sources of the food that is offered for sale there.

Yet some arts initiatives have become a means of addressing and synthesizing the duality of the region. The Contemporary Art Forum Kitchener and Area (CAKFA) is entering into its fourth year as Canada’s only annual international arts festival, bringing together international artists who create and install work based on or inspired by some aspect of Waterloo Regional History in Kitchener’s City Hall.

In late June 2005, Michael J. Ambedian’s *De Angelus*, inspired by Millet’s work, was unveiled and installed in Kitchener’s City Hall. This work pays homage to the agrarian and industrial past of the area while also bringing forth other levels of meaning.

Growing up in Windsor has exposed Ambedian to industrial waste, smog, and urban decay. This pollution has infected Windsor’s air and water qualities. Windsor’s cancer rate is 60% higher than anywhere else in Canada. The apparent destruction of the natural world, which causes a sense of anxiety and foreboding, is evident throughout his production, from his undergrad endeavours at the University of Windsor through to his MFA work at the University of Waterloo.

Dedicated to the tool and mold industry and inspired by his familiarity with his father’s blue-collar roots, Ambedian developed a specialized process of molding trees and other forms, positioning himself as a mold maker to better understand and pay homage to past generations of mold makers. By using molds, Ambedian foregrounds the labour-intensive nature of creating the work. One should also note that his molds have been hand-made, in direct aesthetic opposition to the slick manufactured appearance of machined molds. Like artist Yechel Gagnon and his work on plywood, he attempts to reclaim the natural element from materials that have “lost” their natu-

ralness to industrial processing.

Ambedian’s public art project — currently being completed as a part of his artist-in-residency experience — branches out from his tree metaphor and reintroduces the merits of figurative work. In one sense, figurative work has been intellectually discarded by our current conceptual discourse, yet Ambedian believes there are a number of layers and merits in this traditional practice. In particular, for the public art commission, he uses the figures of the farmer and his wife in Millet’s *De Angelus*. These figures are life-size casts of Ambedian and his partner, artist Sheila McMath. Meticulously constructed of sawdust and carpenters’ glue, the works will be installed at the front of the new Workers Building in downtown Kitchener. Ambedian’s work, with its references to the past, reflects on mortality and temporality. There is a gravity to the pieces that belies their apparent accessibility. He describes his working with sawdust as a redemptive act, attempting to salvage the lost natural resources, while still finding hope. In these works he also pays homage to a lifestyle that is fast disappearing, even from the Waterloo region, which has a stronghold of Mennonite farmers. Ironically, Ambedian had first planned for these pieces to be installed at the Kitchener Farmers’ Market. However, he was told by the market representatives — in a bizarre instance of Orwellian double-speak — that it was no longer a “farmers” market, but was a new, urban market, and they didn’t want any associations with regional history or agriculture.

Ambedian is undoubtedly drawing upon the significance of Millet’s figures as symbols of rural work, rustic piety, and the social implications of the loss, not only of resources, but of a certain way of life, a way of life that is immi-

nently threatened by urban sprawl, industrial growth, and the increased commodification of lifestyles. His choice of hard-working labourers as symbol of those who built the region definitely has social as well as environmental significance.

Ambedian’s grandfather, a Baptist minister, worked extensively with the homeless and societal outcasts. His parents, while not following the organized religion of his grandfather, espoused the “hippie” credo of loving and helping one another. Social concerns, faith as a means of understanding the world and of doing good in the world, have become Ambedian’s touchstones. Art, he believes, requires a certain kind of faith, in that one has to have faith in the meaning of art and the purpose of art-making.

To enter into Kitchener’s City Hall and be confronted by Ambedian’s life-size figures is to encounter not only the past of the Waterloo region, but also the past of Canada itself. The many anonymous settlers who, armed with little more than faith and hope, tilled, farmed and settled this country, are evocatively honoured. Through its materiality and technique, Ambedian’s *De Angelus* also provides a cautionary note on the consequences of the abuse and overuse of our natural resources. Should we continue to deplete them in the manner that we have, then soon all that will remain of them will be the memorials. Ambedian’s installation reminds one that it is through reverence, understanding, and respect for the past that we will advance to a positive future. ←

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