Espace Sculpture

Regina Clay: Worlds in the Making

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There is something about the Canadian psyche that responds to art in "groups." Canadian art 205 foundations are built upon the Group of Seven, Painters Eleven, Regina Five, and the London scene from the 1960s. There's the Isacs Group in Toronto, the Woodland School for First Nations, and the Rankin Inlet printmakers and carvers. Our need to affix a designation, an order if you will, is perhaps somewhat entrenched in human consciousness.

We have a need to create order, to understand, to mark points of reference. It's also understandable that many artists would want to rebel against those categorizations, however illustrous they might be.

For to create art is (generally) to want to create something distinct and unique—to make one's mark as an individual in vision and technique—not to be lumped in as a component part of something else.

The exhibition Regina Clay: World in the Making undertakes to explore a seminal point in Canadian art history—a point where art and craft not only sat comfortably together, but bucked, grumbled, and fed off of each other in a frenetic and stimulating burst of creativity, culminating in a range of work that hadn't been seen before. The source of inspiration was the material itself—clay—evinced in the ceramic medium. A medium which, "despite its versatility," as curator Timothy Long writes in the exhibition brochure, "has struggled to win the respect given to metal and stone. As a medium with so much and not enough history, with abundant promise but no esteem..."

In the 1960s and 1970s in the small prairie city of Regina, Saskatchewan, a remarkable fusion of energy and vision took place amongst a group of fourteen artists: Lorne Beug, Victor Cicansky, Joe Fafard, David Gilhooly, Ricardo Gomez, Beth Home, Ann James, Margaret Keelan, Marilyn Levine, Lorraine Malach, Maija Peeples-Bright, Jack Sures, David Thauberger, and Russell Yuristy. These artists came from a myriad of backgrounds. They came from across national divides and differing cultures, eventually setting up practice in Regina. This was the generation that directly experienced the social changes and upheavals of the 1960s, for whom challenging conventions and mores—which societal or aesthetic—was a given. And in the early seventies, when young faculty and students from the University of Saskatchewan, Regina Campus (University of Regina since 1974), and the annual Emma Lake Artists' Workshops challenged the prevailing modernist orthodoxy, that challenge became identified with a single medium: clay.

This seminal exhibition has been organized and circulated by the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan. Fortunately, it is on tour and will be shown at such venues as Museum London and the Burlington Art Centre, in Ontario, and the MacKenzie and the Kewlona Art Gallery in British Columbia. The dissemination of this exhibition is crucial as it is a part of our visual and cultural history that many people are unfamiliar with. A veritable copia of artwork—bringing together almost 200 art works—, the exhibition explains with form and colour. Some of the artists have become iconic figures, and some—such as Fafard, Sures and Levine—are still very active and well known. Others, less well known, are nonetheless important and integral parts of the Regina Clay experience.

The exhibition, as mounted at Museum London, demanded many viewings—so vast was the range and material presented, from Joe Fafard's sometimes world-weary figures, sitting at a diner, or alone in a room, evoking a sense of recognition for those who live solitary existences (not necessarily by choice), to the effusive reverence of David Gilhooly's whose Frog World seemed to thumb its nose at the temple of modernism.

Maija Peeples-Bright's work was a revelation and a delight. There is a certain insouciant charm to her ceramic pieces that unorthodoxly and effusively combines fabric and ceramics in her crocheted Woof!Woof's, named in honour of her dachshund, Woof. Her clay pieces also give free rein to wild plant and animal fantasies with such alliterative titles as Peacock Peaks.

Ann James was known for the ceramic and rigid polyurethane foam with which she created work