

The Rower

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Morgan MACDONALD,
The Rower, 2005. Lost
wax bronze casting. 310 x
244 x 122 cm. Photo: the
artist.



First, a few facts about Quidi Vidi Lake: a part of the municipality of St. John's, Newfoundland, it lies just north of some of the more historic bits of the city; it's longer than it is wide; a penitentiary overlooks it; there's a park at one end; and midway along its shores sits a large boathouse that is of some pertinence here, for Quidi Vidi Lake is the site of what is in all probability the oldest continuously run sporting event in North America: the Royal St. John's Regatta, officially deemed to have been founded in 1818 but likely dating back to the eighteenth century.

The first Wednesday of August is the provincial holiday in Newfoundland: Regatta Day. It's a holiday, that is, if the weather is just right, for Regatta Day is the only civic holiday in Canada determined by weather conditions and decided upon by a committee of non-elected officials. On Regatta Day, tens of thousands of Newfoundlanders converge at Quidi Vidi Lake to watch rowing crews—male and female, six rowers and a coxswain to a rowing shell—compete in heats throughout the day (unlike most rowing competitions, the teams race down to one end of the lake, turn around, and race back again), all of which culmi-

nates in the championship races held in the early evening.

Despite its significance to and place in Newfoundland history and culture, the regatta (like so much else in our society) has never been commemorated with a public piece of art. In August of 2005, that all changed when *The Rower* was installed on a site near the regatta starting line. It's a cast bronze sculpture depicting a rower in mid-stroke, his oar sweeping out a large arc of water.

The Rower is the creation of Morgan MacDonald, a 24 year-old native Newfoundlander with a degree in Business Administration and a year's worth of formal art education that whet his appetite for bronze casting and led to a three-year apprenticeship with sculptor Luban Boykov in St. John's. *The Rower* is MacDonald's creation in every possible sense; its origin isn't traced back to an open call for proposals for a public work of art, but was entirely self-generated. Of his own volition, MacDonald sculpted a maquette and assembled a supporting proposal with which he approached the city of St. John's and the Grand Concourse Authority, the organization responsible for urban beautification projects. Final costs of the work (which was cast at Artcast in Georgetown, Ontario) were evenly split between the municipality and

Elinor Gill Ratcliffe, a philanthropist in Newfoundland with a keen interest in public art.

That's the short version of the facts of the matter. The poetics of *The Rower* begin with an inevitable cultural stereotype: specifically, that cartoonish image of Newfoundland as little more than a place of fishing boats and sturdy dories—certainly not one that might be home to sophisticated rowing events involving sleek racing shells, coxswains, and the kind of competition they involve, all courtesy the province's colonial British heritage.

Beyond such misperception, however, *The Rower* must be located in the context of the kind of public sculpture Canada has seen fit to provide for itself; monuments to sporting events, it seems, just aren't at the top of that list. Best known of the bunch is, in all likelihood, Michael Snow's *The Audience*, the figurative, site-specific pieces he did for Toronto's Skydome that, while not focused on a specific sporting event per se, enact a series of representations of varied spectator responses. But as the sculptural representation of sporting events is much more typically confined to, say, the tops of things like bowling trophies, *The Rower* may, by default, very well end up becoming an important part of this sub-genre of public art.

All that being said, its represen-

tation of the event it commemorates is less literal than one might immediately suspect; like Michael Snow, Morgan MacDonald didn't think it aesthetically prudent or necessary to spell out everything in a form of visual verbatim. While the life-size figure of the rower himself is true, entire and intact (and according to MacDonald, cleaves to no specific person, though the artist used himself as a model to get things properly proportioned), the sculpture as a whole is fragmentary and incomplete, suggestive as opposed to realistic. The rowing shell central to the racing event this work honours is representationally absent here; the figure of the rower—barefoot (unlike the actual rowers of today) and clad in shorts and tank top—is instead sitting at a point where the bronze arc of water that sweeps out from behind the blade of the oar meets up with a highly stylized chunk of cast metal that alludes in only the loosest possible way to anything remotely akin to a vessel.

And therein lies the work's success and strength. By not cleaving so strongly in its representation to the particulars of the action in which it finds its origins (with would allow little or no room for aesthetic manoeuvring), *The Rower*, instead, leaves itself wide open to interpretation. What we end up with, then, is a larger monument of and to possibilities, a commemoration of the significance of elemental water and its primary role in Canadian culture: from Viking longboats rowed and sailed to Newfoundland's shores in the first European contact with the New World, to First Nations canoes and kayaks, to the voyageurs opening up the continent, to the construction of canals and the St. Lawrence Seaway to facilitate trade and settlement, to today's recreational activities...

I know, it's all a bit of a stretch, and a heavy load for any one piece of public art to bear. But *The Rower* is, at its very core, a monument to dreams and to human potential. The purview can't be limited, however much one might wish it to be, to a one-day racing event, however culturally significant it might be. ←

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