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John Henry Fine Day

Greg Beatty

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The first time I interviewed Saskatchewan First Nations artist John Henry Fine Day was via email in September 2004, when he was in Vancouver to receive medical treatment for leukemia. The next time I interviewed him was in person at the Art Gallery of Regina in June 2006, just prior to the opening of his and fellow Regina sculptor Sean Whalley's collaborative exhibition Somewhere In Between.

During our first interview, the focus was split between an exhibition of bas-relief carvings and paintings Fine Day then had on display at a local gallery under the title The Kiss Good-bye, and his by then two-year battle with cancer. Since being diagnosed, he recalled at the time, he'd immersed himself in traditional First Nations spiritual beliefs, drawing comfort and strength from things like sweat lodges and healing ceremonies. Thematically, his work was also impacted by his illness. "Having leukemia has made me think a lot about life, death and rebirth," he said. "I'm either going to live or die. I have a 50/50 chance. If I die, then what happens? These are things I have to think about."

Thus far, Fine Day has managed to beat the odds. Born in 1974, Fine Day is a member of the Sweetgrass First Nation, whose home reserve is located in west-central Saskatchewan. He received his BFA from the First Nations University of Canada in Regina in 2002. While enrolled at FNNUC, he received instruction in both traditional First Nations and contemporary Western art-making techniques and art history. That duality was evident in The Kiss Good-bye. Compositionally, most of the carvings consisted of a strong central image set against a brightly coloured, richly textured background which recalled the Christian Orthodox practice of icon painting. But his use of cedar as a carving material denoted a definite First Nations influence. Along with sage, sweetgrass and tobacco, cedar is regarded as sacred by Aboriginal people and is used in prayers and other ceremonies. Of similar cultural significance was Fine Day's use of animals like the raven, owl, dog and bear as subject matter. All are powerful totems. Commenting on the owl, Fine Day said, "It's a messenger, often of bad news, or even death. I've never encountered the owl in ceremony, but I've heard them and seen them in my day-to-day life. I work with the owl to investigate what it means."

While not a chronic per se, The Kiss Good-bye did serve as a poignant testament to Fine Day's struggle against cancer. His imagery wasn't morbid, more grief-laden - ravens shedding tears, bears imprisoned in cages. A similar sense of personal peril was absent in his most recent show with Whalley. Instead, a sense of collective peril was evoked via the artists' exploration of the disconnect between culture and nature in our increasingly technologically advanced society. Equally provocative was the cross-cultural character of Fine Day and Whalley's collaboration. While likely a non-issue for the artists - the initial motivation for collaborating, Fine Day said, was a belief that "the shapes and textures [of our work] were similar and worked really well together" - their ancestry, in the broader context of Regina's history and current socio-economic and political climate, was not insignificant.

Race is an issue in Regina which many of the artists explored. Whether we want to admit it or not, there are issues of Somewhere In Between. Although many of the artists worked relatively independently, "We started off with sketches, and talking about what we wanted for each piece," said Whalley. "We had a rough plan, then once things got to a certain stage we'd bring [stuff] together and say 'How's this working? Does it match up to our initial concept?' That's where the tweaking came in." One local newspaper critic, in his review of the show, chastised the duo for failing to fully integrate their respective artistic contributions, but Whalley, for one, felt the process had had an impact on his working method. "I've been working with laminated wood for a long time, and this gave me an opportunity to explore some new ideas," he said. Like his 2000 Dunlop Gallery exhibition Second Story (reviewed in Espace no. 71), Whalley presented several tree-like forms built from discarded lumber salvaged from construction sites. But in shaping the sculptures, Whalley said he'd striven to "respond to the animistic and anthropomorphic that's evident in John Henry's work, and less to the minimalism."

"The trees are in the middle of transforming into birds and animals," said Fine Day. "Sean reclames and recycles lumber that was once living, and brings it back to life. I do the same with the rawhide pieces. I take skin from once-living animals and turn it into new animals."

Describing his own feelings as to the current state of the environment, Whalley said, "We're kind of an obtuse culture in a lot of ways. We're aware of the problem. Probably 80% of Canadians, you could ask them, and they'd be aware of the problem. We're aware of the problem. We're aware of the ozone layer, the depletion of the ozone layer, the extinction of species."

Having already completed a major commission for FNNUC (he carved the doors on the Elders' tipi located in the University's lobby), Fine Day is represented by the Nouveau Gallery in Regina. In November, he will have a solo show there.

John Henry Fine Day, Somewhere In Between Art Gallery of Regina Summer 2006

Greg BEATTY is a freelance art and culture critic from Regina. He's published extensively with a variety of Canadian periodicals, and is also a contributing editor for the alternative Regina magazine Prairie Dog.