

John Henry Fine Day

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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*.

Nation, whose home reserve is located in west-central Saskatchewan. He received his BFA from the First Nations University of Canada in Regina in 2004. While enrolled at FNUC, 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 chronicle *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 technological 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 insignifi-

cant. Race is an issue in Regina whether we want to admit it or not, I wrote in a preview article for the alt-bi-weekly magazine *prairie dog*. Even within the art community, tensions exist between Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian artists with respect to issues like appropriation and the proper use of Traditional Knowledge.

To the extent that Fine Day and Whalley did blend their various sculptures into a single installation, *Somewhere In Between* qualified as a collaboration, although the artists still 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 2004 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 organicness of trees." He also installed his pieces on bases, instead of simply resting them on the gallery floor, to enhance the formal presentation of his and Fine Day's work.

For his part, Fine Day produced a series of forest animals sculpted out of moose hide and welded steel. Generally small in scale, they tended to be incorporated into Whalley's "trees." In one, a stitched rawhide rabbit sat inside a glassed-in hollow, while in others beak- and claw-like forms appeared to be emerging from the wood. In our interview, Fine Day and Whalley joked about experiencing the odd tense moment while debating various aesthetic options for bringing the exhibition to fruition. "It was a challenge, but

once the pieces started to come together it was quite exciting and satisfying," said Fine Day. "There were some worries about things I thought wouldn't look right. But it all turned out."

Where the artists had no trouble finding common ground was in their commitment to the environment. Usually, the disconnect between culture and nature that the artists explored is associated with the West, while Indigenous cultures like that represented by Fine Day are regarded as being more in tune with nature. That's probably still true today. But as the participation of Aboriginal people in "mainstream" Canadian society grows, divisions have arisen between those who cleave to traditional ways and those who, in Fine Day's words, desire to "progress into the modern age." Appropriately enough, transformation and change were two major themes of *Somewhere In Between*. "The trees are in the middle of transforming into birds and animals," said Fine Day. "Sean recycles and reclaims 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 melting polar ice caps, increased carbon monoxide in the atmosphere, the depletion of the ozone layer. Yet at the same time, we're kind of spoiled. We enjoy our comforts. We like to be comfortable."

Having already completed a major commission for FNUC (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
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Somewhere In Between, 2006. Detail. A collaborative installation by John Henry Fine Day and Sean Woodruff Whalley. Wood, steel, rawhide. Photo courtesy: Art Gallery of Regina.

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