

Heather Benning: *Field Doll*

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Heather BENNING: *Field Doll*

Gregory C. BEATTY

Picture yourself in a car traversing the vast expanse of rural Saskatchewan. Grid road or major highway, it doesn't matter. You're driving along, and on a whim you decide to pull over and visit one of the abandoned farmyards that dot the countryside. Stripped of paint, with its windows broken and doors kicked in, the house stands as a silent sentinel to a bygone way of life. As you wander through the yard, you discover a child's doll lying on its side, its bright blue eyes staring blindly ahead. Pretty poignant metaphor for the rural depopulation that has occurred throughout the prairies in recent decades, eh?

But what if the doll was 12-feet tall? That would put a different spin on things. Oh, the doll would still evoke thoughts of childhood innocence and families being uprooted by socio-economic forces beyond their control. But its sheer size, in an artistic context anyway, could also be interpreted as a comment on the scale of modern agriculture, where farmers, with the aid of massive tractors and combines costing hundreds of thousands of dollars, cultivate tens of thousands of acres, and intensive cattle and hog operations abound.

mately, the closure of schools, hospitals, skating rinks, post offices and other amenities that help sustain a community.

In 2007, while in the midst of an 18-month residency in Redvers in east-central Saskatchewan, Benning created a work called *Dollhouse* where she cut away one wall of a deserted two-story farm house in the area and painstakingly restored its interior to give it a late 1960s feel — which was when the house was actually abandoned by the family that had once inhabited it. In the two photographs of the house that curator Jeff Nye has included in this exhibition, an old pair of black-and-brown CCM skates can be seen hanging from a hook by the back door. And a reproduction of Gainsborough's famous *Blue Boy* graces — if that's the right word — the living room wall. At night, functioning lamps and other lights illuminated the interior. Unlike a real dollhouse, though, where it's possible for a person to reach in and play with the contents, Benning's house was sealed with sheets of Plexiglas. That gave it the air of a museum or heritage site. A feeling she reinforced by hanging a stopped clock on the kitchen wall.

In 2008, Benning followed up that project by fabricating a giant baby doll based on a toy she remembers having as a girl. In proportional terms, her sculpture is precisely 12 times larger than the toy doll, with a detachable head cast out of acrylic resin and a cloth body stuffed with foam chips and styrofoam. It was on display in the gallery, along with a photo of the doll lying in a field beside a decrepit barn apropos of the scenario described above. The photo was taken in winter, so the doll has a light dusting of snow on it.

In a gallery setting, the doll, with its generic facial features, moulded hair and stump-like hands, does convey an air of menace. Truly, it is a giant in comparison with the mere mortals who gaze upon it. Given the vastness of the prairie landscape that surrounds it in the photograph, the doll appears to fit more naturally. Still, it remains an imposing presence. Just like the giant tractors, barns, trucks and silos that are integral to modern corporate farms.



Quite apart from their socio-economic impact, these mega-farms are also proving to be problematic from an environmental perspective. Intensive mono-cropping of wheat and other grains is stripping the soil of much-needed nutrients, and diminishing bio-diversity in the ecosystem, while large-scale cattle and hog operations produce an enormous amount of manure and other waste — kind of like Benning's doll would, if it was actually alive and peeing/pooping/ farting/belching.

Benning's family stopped farming in 1998 around the time she graduated from high school. Holding a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, she is currently completing an MFA in Sculpture at the Edinburgh College of Art & Design in Scotland. In discussing *Field Doll* with me, she insisted the show wasn't intended to serve as a heart-felt plea for Saskatchewan to return to its bucolic roots as a haven for family farms and a rural-orientated lifestyle. True, in one of the dollhouse photos, a rainbow can be seen arcing behind the house after what, judging from the dark clouds that are also visible, was a good old-fashioned prairie thunderstorm. Those who lament the waning vitality of rural Saskatchewan might regard the rainbow as a sign that better days lie ahead. To a certain extent, they perhaps do. Saskatchewan's two largest cities — Saskatoon and Regina — aren't the only beneficiaries of the province's current economic boom. Smaller cities and towns are thriving as well. But their success lies in their ability

to function as service centres in regional economies. Hamlets, villages and small family farms aren't likely to make a comeback any time soon. For me, then, the rainbow represents the idea that for many rural residents, the proverbial pot of gold that they sought did not lie in homesteads like the one pictured, but rather in larger, more economically diverse, communities.

Among entertainers, there's an old adage that many artists and curators in the contemporary art world would do well to emulate: always leave them wanting more. Instead, in far too many instances, they stuff too much art into shows, taxing the time, patience and interest of viewers. *Field Doll*, I'm pleased to report, is one of those rare exhibitions where I truly was left wanting more. More photos of the dollhouse at different times of the day. More photos of the doll installed in different locations in rural Saskatchewan. Yes, *Field Doll* was punctuated by the installation of an overturned, rust-flecked tricycle with one rear wheel spinning squeakily as if being blown by the prairie wind. But as an elegy to Saskatchewan's pioneer past, and the sacrifices that our ancestors made in settling the province, it was exquisite.

Heather Benning, *Field Doll*
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Heather BENNING,
Field Doll, 2008-2009.
Mixed media sculpture.
Photo: Courtesy of the
artist.



Heather BENNING, *Field Doll*, 2009. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Born and raised on a farm near the town of Humboldt in north-central Saskatchewan, Heather Benning is well-acquainted with the evolving nature of rural life. Driven by mechanization and globalization, the number of family farms in Benning's home province has plummeted from a high of 142,391 in the late 1920s to roughly 50,000 today. Fewer farms mean fewer potential customers for businesses in nearby towns and villages. Fewer businesses mean fewer off-farm jobs, less tax revenue for municipalities, and ulti-