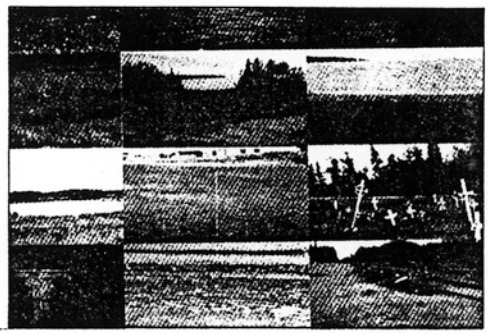
Artist's "Treaty Lands" exhibit stereotypes its subject

by Todd Lamirande

Even though I wasn't sure I should be doing it, I browsed through the comment book for Tim Schouten's second solo Winnipeg art show. There were such comments as "awesome", "beautiful", "splendid concept" and "gifts of insight into the future." As I walked through the gallery, gazing at Schouten's expressionistic paintings, I became a little confused as to what gift of insight was actually being displayed.



According to the artist's press release, Schouten is not Aboriginal, but he became interested in the "mysterious tiny pink areas" that appeared on a Manitoba highway map. He visited the Bloodvein, Peguis and Sturgeon Weir (sic) First Nations and took photographs of the "Treaty Lands"—hence the name of his show. From these photographs he produced a series of 20 oil paintings.

Aboriginal people are absent within these frames. Their existence is only implied through the inclusion of buildings, railroad tracks and a graveyard. Almost as if the artist is suggesting that the people have become insignificant on their own land. Instead, the land itself dominates. The horizon is set two-thirds to three-quarters up the painting, shrinking the sky to the point that the land overwhelms the paintings' compositions. Without any personal subject matter to characterize the works, the lands depicted could be any lands, not necessarily "treaty lands". Therefore, composition, style and the use of colour must be scrutinized to interpret Schouten's vision and determine what is so "Indian" about these works. In fact, why should the exhibit be called "Treaty Lands" in the first place?

Evidence of technology is largely absent from these compositions. A couple of paintings do show railroad tracks, but they are lonely objects, perhaps years have passed since any train has travelled over them. In two paintings of villages, the artist is being deliberately deceitful, because the cars seen in the photographs that the paintings were based upon have disappeared in the finished product. Does Schoeten not know how to draw and paint a car, or is he just trying to emphasize how technologically backward these reserves are?

One would think that buildings themselves would signify some sort of technology. But in one painting the buildings are rendered insignificant by the huge dirt road that dominates the foreground. Again the dirt road is a symbol of the lack of progress found in this village. In the other painting depicting a village the foreground again dominates the composition with a huge dark-blue body of water. The oppressive use of the colour blue emotes a feeling of cold depression. The warm tones of the village buildings would make a stark contrast they were not dominated by this ocean of blue melancholy.

The use of colour is significant in several of the other paintings. Blues, purples, reds and earth tones are often blended together to create a muddy and murky landscape, a dirty sludge that calls to mind images of a World War I no-man's land stripped bare of life. Another painting of a controlled prairie fire is dominated by red and yellow pigment. Rather than representing reserve land, it resembles a hellish holocaust.

The overall impression of the exhibit is one of emptiness and desolation. The land has become an aggressive presence that swallows the sky and dares anybody to stroll across its surface or live off of it. The question naturally arises as to why anyone would want to live on any of these treaty lands. Just when this thought occurs Schouten delivers his *coup de grace*.

After signing his comment book, the visitor can take free reprinted copies of Treaties 1, 2 and 5 home with them. Here the artist makes his political statement: The Aboriginal people can't leave this land because the white man, with his written contracts, has forced them to live there. The whole effect is to generate sympathy for the plight of a people who are never seen except in the very abstract. Schouten no doubt had honourable intentions, but he does not honour the people who are the ostensible subjects.

I am reminded of the Heather Robertson's 1970 book, *Reservations are for Indians*, where the author in an attempt to demonstrate the desperate dire straits of the people of Norway House described the community by using images of slime and scum. This approach ignored the feelings of the people in the community who were still smarting from her comments twenty-five years later.

I am afraid Schouten has fallen into the same trap. Being a non-Aboriginal he has little knowledge of the subjects of which he paints except through the stereotypes the media continuously regurgitates. I wonder if he actually got out of his automobile when he was taking snapshots of Indian Country. With their veneration of the land it is unlikely any Aboriginal artist would have depicted even their own reserve lands in this manner. Schouten has merely created an exhibit of "Indian problem" art, and he should revisit the reserves and get to know the people before continuing his "Treaty Lands" project.

"Treaty Lands" can be viewed at the Site Gallery, 55 Arthur Street, 2nd Floor, Winnipeg. The exhibit runs from February 3rd to February 28th, 1998. For more information call (204)947-3976.

Peguis
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The Peguis First Nation, the Chief and Council, and the Peguis School Board wish to extend congratulations to the graduates of the Aboriginal Broadcast Training Initiative.

We would like to honour and recognize the following graduates from Peguis.

Angela Bear

Marlin Greyeyes

Ryan Slater

Robert Thomas

We are proud of the hard work and commitment you have demonstrated.

We wish you many more successes in your chosen career.