

Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

## Unsteady ground

Vivid landscapes explore natural beauty and complicated histories

By: **Steven Leyden Cochrane**

Posted: 03/13/2014 1:00 AM | Comments: 0g



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*Fort Totten State Historic Site (Spirit Lake)*

### ART REVIEW

#### The Spirit Lake Project

Tim Schouten

GUREVICH FINE ART

- 200-62 Albert St.
- Until March 31

In Tim Schouten's North Dakota landscapes, the ground is anything but solid.

Made with gestural swipes of encaustic (a mixture of molten beeswax, resins, oils and pigments), Schouten's paintings are emphatically "physical," even as the scenes he depicts seem ready to dissolve in front of us. Their surfaces churn with layered encrustations of highly textured, richly hued wax, giving equal weight and substance to land and sky. Meanwhile, ghostly telephone poles and rough outlines of buildings hover like mirages in the narrow space between.

Though the views themselves are calm, the Winnipeg artist's frenzied handling suggests an underlying turbulence, something the clean boundaries of the picture plane and the stark prairie horizon can't quite contain. Despite their pastoral beauty and seductive surfaces, many of the paintings seem on the brink of rupture, as if threatening to cast up buried trauma.

Given the land in question, it seems possible.

For years now, Schouten has made work examining his own place on native land, focusing on the inequitable and selectively honoured treaties that carve up and govern it. Currently on view at Gurevich Fine Art, The Spirit Lake Project is part of a larger initiative spearheaded by the North Dakota Museum of Art, which commissioned an international group of artists to create work responding to often difficult conditions on the nearby Spirit Lake Tribe Indian Reservation.

Over several years of regular visits to Spirit Lake, Schouten produced a number of works in addition to the landscapes. These included portraits of tribal members and others living on the reservation, as well as a number of simple, text-based paintings. Rendered in the same quavering encaustic smears, the snippets of text -- "non-beneficiary," "allotment," "sold his land" -- invoke the chilly bureaucratic terms that govern First Nations land and people, legalese whose blankness belies cruel realities of forced relocation and enduring hardship.

These texts are mostly absent in works at Gurevich, however, the landscape mostly left to speak for

itself. In a smaller acrylic study on paper, storm clouds gather over vibrant green trees alongside a vacant rural driveway. In one painting, Fort Totten -- built to house soldiers dispatched to manage the reservation, later a residential school -- looms mutely into the horizon. When people appear, as they do in a cluster of tiny encaustic studies, they're silent and indistinct. Bordering on complete abstraction, the studies have the depth and distance of old photographs, the faces worn past recognition. We barely make out the kids playing or the men standing mutely by the roadside.

Language does make one incursion, though. In a diptych called Red Day Slough, flat expanses of land becomes seething lava fields of red and green and yellow ochres, each captioned with surveyor's shorthand: "NW-NW-Sec-26," "NE-NE-Sec-26." The ragged letters look like they could have been branded or burned, but they're rendered in a shocking blue that leaps off the canvas, making them seem to throb and hover weirdly in place. The contrast is jarring.

It would be easy to appreciate Schouten's Spirit Lake paintings as simply observant, evocative meditations on place. The reality, the isolated fragments of text remind us, is more complex. In the context of the show, they're a slight but startling invocation of the colonial endeavour: to subdivide, subdue and manage the land and its people. They strike a crucial note of self-consciousness and doubt that colours our perception of the other works.

Schouten invites us to admire the landscape of Spirit Lake, but he asks us to consider from what vantage point we do so -- and at what cost.

*Steven Leyden Cochrane is a Winnipeg-based artist, writer and educator.*

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