

materials such as birchbark, deerskin, aniline dye and hand-pounded copper into the syntax of industrial automobile production—produces a compelling dialogue between monumental physicality and the intangible dynamics of symbolism. The 1957 Apache is almost completely hand-carved, conspicuously replacing metal with wood, traditional ornaments with moons and coyotes, and industrial paint with rich dyes reflective of the southwestern landscape (azure, pink and amber). The 1958 Stratochief is introduced with Benner's earnest aim to "[represent] the great person that bears its name," materially evoking the history and habitat of Chief Pontiac, who fought both French and British colonialists in the 1760s. The 1957 DeSoto performs a similar elegy to a very different effect, recalling Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto (and his destructive colonization activities for the Spanish Crown) through a visceral mix of cold-rolled steel, armour-like construction and blood-red pigskin interiors.

All three auto-sculptures, therefore, bear their own stories, but they all share roughly cobbled surfaces full of rivets, pulled skins and knotholes that collectively produce a patchwork subverting the smooth lines and aerodynamic curves of the standard automobile. In chorus with the many scratches, smudges and irregularities that also mark his works, Benner breaks up the seamless procession of spectacle with visual hitches that create the time and space needed for reconsideration. As you peer further

between the cracks and mentally reopen the incisions long stitched up and smoothed over by time—looking at the undersides of these massive vehicles through their cavernous grilles—the space expands as you discover hollows devoid of mechanical workings.

Emptied of their automotive functionality as well, Benner's auto-sculptures are revealed as vehicles of the *mind* rather than the *road*. These massive totems are not meant to speed forward or coast idly, but to slowly navigate the byways and interstates of post-colonial language. More precisely, the materials and manner of their employment point back to the origins of automobile nomenclature: injecting complicating elements into the larger, unchecked syntax of linguistic conquest. By partially repatriating names such as Pontiac and Apache to their original subjects, Benner loosens the parameters of the titles and makes room for alternative definitions to enter the discourse. And while he runs the inherent risk involved in all deconstructive gestures, of capitulating Aboriginal history to the aesthetic codes of the dominant culture, his alterations of automotive standards effectively mine the autonomy of the industry's image machine. In doing this Benner veers into the equally problematic territory of replacing romanticized myths with potentially inflated legends of past figures. But his sense of responsibility and purpose consistently balance his occasional slips into romanticism. Like the solemn eagles and ragged hogsheads that take the

place of rear-view mirrors on his vehicles, this artist finds insight in the liminal space between motion and memory. ■

"Tom Benner: Cruising the Margins" has been touring extensively since 2002 and will continue through 2005.

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VISUAL ART

Tim Schouten

Marianne Mays

It may at times be subtle, but politics is never far from the surface in Tim Schouten's paintings. Buildings are ghostly, superimposed on brooding prairie landscapes; figures are blurred and never fully captured. Schouten's paintings examine our relation to the things we see. Beyond questions of looking, he carefully positions his landscapes and horses in particular contexts, so they oblige the viewer to query further into *why* we see things the way we see them.

Based on a poem of the same name by the late American poet and animal rights philosopher Vicki Hearne, Schouten's exhibition "In the Absence of Horses" at Ken Segal Gallery is comprised of a beautifully presented suite of 40

(out of 100) small-scale encaustic paintings of horses. Schouten's fascination with horses and his interest in the "historic relationship between man and horse" are informed by Hearne's writings on the inner moral lives of domestic animals.

In his encaustic technique, rather than using the wax and pigment for inlay, Schouten applies a mixture of oils, beeswax and microcrystalline in thick brush and hot iron work. He also works back into the pieces with various heating implements and other tools. The result is lush and ambient, contingent on the play of light for depth and substance, or fragile translucence. These paintings are nothing short of magical. All evolved out of a single initial image of a horse rolling in the dirt, Schouten says. The encaustic technique uniquely confers the strength, vigour and intensity of the horse's emblematic movement. Revealing as they are in their energy and presence, the figures are simultaneously ephemeral—as though resisting seizure, whether literal or imagined. Hooves circle the air, muscles slacken and contract, spindly, elegant legs never betray the mass they support. Yet their presence welcomes us to a physical reality more insistent than memory or philosophy, rife and rich and wild with the immediacy of life. As Hearne argues in "More on the Question of Anguish," a part of her larger serial poem *In the Absence of Horses*:

Whether or not one action is
A rose or the glitter eyes
Take on the desperate

Parchment of these violent
Sands that shift, grumbling, and toss
Miracles of intention

Up before our eyes. But such
Questions may not be answered:
Here, in the grass, are horses.

The painter grapples happily with the untamed aspects of his subject matter. As Schouten reminds us in his artist's statement, horses—except for their limited, specialized use in rodeos and ranches—are now more frequently present in legend than in reality. So a significant aspect of his work lies in honouring the vitality of these animals that were once domesticated for human use and then fell out of fashion.

Myth looms larger for Schouten in his "Treaty Suites" paintings, another recent exhibition, where he tackles landscape. Entitled "The Treaty 2 Suite (Where IS Treaty Land?)," Schouten's <SITE> Gallery show is about human relation to land—an often lyrically characterized relationship that lightly veils burning political issues of New World ownership.

It is political questions of property and Aboriginal disenfranchisement that beat at the heart of these paintings. The exhibition is accompanied by a pamphlet that includes in their entirety *Treaties 1 and 2 between Her Majesty the Queen and The Chippewa and Cree Indians of Manitoba and Country Adjacent with Adhesions*. These treaties outline the land thereby assumed to belong to "Her said Majesty the Queen and Her successors forever" (i.e., European

settlers), while they set aside other land in "reserve for the sole and exclusive use of the Indians." Schouten's landscapes detail the exact locations of the signing of these treaties.

By so definitively establishing historical circumstance, Tim Schouten presents landscapes in a context more urgent than mythological scenes or pretty pictures—though that they are. They range from sparing, minimalist takes on the prairie horizon to impressionist depictions of reflecting rivers and lakes that would make even Monet a bit envious. Schouten's respect

and awe for the land are evident, and his perspective challenges the imperialist "man-versus-nature" address of the Prairies.

There is such longing in these portraits. Longing for communion with the land. Longing for the land itself. A longing to belong to the land. Questions of land and property are altered in this type of encounter.

In *On the Road to Kinosota (Treaty 2)*, an immense sky undulates with an uneasy, greenish cast over tall summer-ripe trees and already autumn-tinged prairie grasses. In *Coming Ashore (Treaty 2)*, a grey-brown mud meets a distant horizon of pallid buildings and a dark fringe of trees punctuates dense, dusky-white air. *The Little Saskatchewan at the Assiniboine (Treaty 2)* burns with intense hot reds shining through murky green, orange and yellow layers of encaustic to comprise a fall river, the sky suspended wan and colourless overhead. In *Rail Yard, Brandon, Facing West (Treaty 2)*, the buttermilk sky dominates a spectre of trains, tracks and buildings outlined in thin red lines, as if their existence were somehow debatable.

Landscape is a form, it could be argued, that's been done enough, overdetermined by its ubiquity in art history. Still, when the land looks out to you, when it calls you to it, when it asks you to look at it with new eyes—as in Schouten's paintings—there is something to that pull that can't be denied. Even more so when that pull invokes larger issues—those of a world swelling with tensions between colonial and Native powers, of a

world overtaxed by pollution and harsh ownership, of landscapes in jeopardy. ■

"In the Absence of Horses" exhibited at the Ken Segal Gallery in Winnipeg from December 2, 2004, to January 8, 2005. "Where IS Treaty Land?" exhibited at <SITE> Gallery from November 4 to November 27, 2004.

Marianne Mays's chapbook of poetry UMBRELLA SUITES will be published by JackPine Press in Spring 2005.

top: Tim Schouten, *Coming Ashore (Treaty 2)*, 2004, oil, beeswax, dammar resin, microcrystalline wax on canvas, 24 x 30". Photographs courtesy the artist.

below: Tim Schouten, *Untitled (In the Absence of Horses)*, 2004, oil, beeswax, microcrystalline wax on canvas, 8 x 10".

