

Artists explore the meaning of being native

There are no easy answers to new social relations, exhibits suggest

WHAT does it mean to be native to a place — to say something along the lines of “I am from here, and this is my land and my people”?

In the case of Manitoba's aboriginals, legally binding treaties and a sense of historical entitlement give them the right to say that.

With relative newcomers like me, that right is a little more ambiguous.

Ethnic diversities aside, though, what do these things mean to us as Manitobans?

These questions, and many others, fuel two art exhibits currently running in Winnipeg: One by Roger Crait at the Urban Shaman Gallery, the other by Tim Schouten at <Site>.

Crait, who is half Cree, and Schouten, who is of European descent, approach these questions from the angles that are most familiar to them: For Crait, it's from his perspective as a status Indian, for Schouten, it's from the perspective of a newcomer.

Crait has participated in numerous exhibits, including the Young Winnipeg Artists show at the Plug In ICA last year, and had a recent solo show in Thunder Bay. He creates energetic, urban-influenced art and, at first glance, there's nothing traditionally “native” about his work.

In fact, his style owes more to graffiti artists, like the legendary New Yorker Jean-Michel Basquiat, or to local art collectives such as 2-6 or the Orange Lab — Crait and fellow Orange Lab member Kevin Friedrich borrow heavily from each other's work.

The exhibit contains five pieces dealing with colonialism and its effect on today's native population, and shows a young artist from whom we can expect to hear more in the future.

In the tradition of urban art, Crait's fast-moving cityscapes use more than just paint — corporate symbols, such as Indian Motorcycles and Big Red Gum, are included in his work, as well as bits of newspaper, bus transfers, plastic eyes, numbers, and scrawled graffiti.

One work — Give A Man A Fish — alludes to the old saying: “Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.” Painted on a large fish-shaped board, the work comments on the welfare system, and how that has played out in Canada's native communities.

The title seems to suggest a negative view of a system that has often been criticized by natives and non-natives alike.

At <Site> Gallery, Tim Schouten's exhibit is part of his ongoing series of paintings, featuring the sites of 11 treaty signings between Canada and its native



Lorne Roberts

ART REVIEW

- Rez of War
- By Roger Crait
- Urban Shaman Gallery, 233 McDermott Ave.
- To Dec. 11
- The Treaty 2 Suite
- By Tim Schouten
- <Site>, 55 Arthur St.
- To Nov. 27

peoples. These treaties granted natives certain rights to land and government support, and are still the cause of continual legal wrangling between natives and the federal government.

Schouten has researched the exact locations of treaty signings, photographed those sites and then painted them. He uses oil and encaustic, a wax-based style of painting that can produce unique and interesting works, as it does here.

Despite their out-of-focus quality, the shapes and colours of these landscapes are immediately recognizable to any Prairie dweller. And rather than just focusing on what the land looks like, this blurring technique forces the viewer think about what the land actually represents.

As with Crait's show, it's interesting to note the influence of other artists: The scrawled text and simple line drawings in a few pieces are an interesting new addition to Schouten's work, and seem to be the influence of younger artists like slomotion (a.k.a. Shawn Morin), with whom Schouten exhibited at aceart this summer.

In his tranquil but historically charged landscapes (Little Saskatchewan at the Assiniboine, Treaty 2, is my favourite), Schouten deals with the thorny issue of treaty rights, and what they mean, both now and historically.

So what do treaties mean? Lots, probably, but I'm no expert. What we're left with is this: Two artists considering important issues, rooted in history, that still affect the day-to-day relations of natives and non-natives.

Here in Winnipeg, with the largest aboriginal population in Canada, those issues are hard to ignore. The question is, then, how do we all, as these new people called Manitobans, make these strange new social relations work?

Schouten and Crait suggest there are no easy answers, but remind us that we can start here and now — honouring the past, but looking toward the future.