

My Winnipeg

Curators: Paula Aisemberg, Hervé Di Rosa and Anthony Kiendl

An exhibition co-produced by la maison rouge, Miam in Sète and Plug In ICA, in Winnipeg.

Why Winnipeg?

At a time when people lament globalisation and accuse the art world of increasing uniformity, la maison rouge is showcasing some little-known and original art scenes in a bid to show some of the exciting art that thrives on the periphery, away from the major centres of contemporary creation, and which warrants our attention. There are clearly rewards to be gained and discoveries to be made by getting off the beaten track. The first city la maison rouge is exploring is Winnipeg. Others will follow.

A brief history of Winnipeg

Winnipeg, from the indigenous Cree word meaning “muddy waters,” is the capital of the province of Manitoba. It is something of an island in the middle of the Canadian Prairies, in the continental centre of North America, halfway between Toronto and Vancouver. The nearest major city, Minneapolis, is an eight-hour drive. Winnipeg’s 700,000 inhabitants make up over half the population of Manitoba.

Its site, known as The Forks, at the confluence of the Red River and the Assiniboine, was for several centuries a centre for trading among First Nations peoples, including the Cree, Assiniboine and Ojibwe. The city still has Canada’s largest urban population of Aboriginal peoples. At the beginning of the 18th century, the French and then the English set up fur trading posts, before the city was founded in 1873. It grew rapidly, with the building of the railway across the North American continent which linked the Atlantic with the Pacific, and made the city a hub for grain trade in the west. Many immigrants settled there. Ukrainians, Russians, Icelanders, Mennonites, Italians, Greeks, Poles, and Chinese flocked to Winnipeg. Nicknamed “the Chicago of the North,” the city remained a major trading centre until the Panama Canal was built in 1914 and transport of goods was rerouted south. The economic crisis of 1929 hastened the city’s economic decline, from which it never really recovered.

But Winnipeg’s cultural dynamism did not die away. The city has set up institutions for dance, music and theatre, and numerous structures support the cinema, photography, video and the visual arts. Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art, which is jointly staging the exhibition, was set up by a group of artists in the 1970s. In spite of - or perhaps because of - the feeling they are living in a city that no longer holds any particular appeal (flat, cold, isolated, dull...), compared with the glamour of the American cities

whose images and culture are splashed all over television, Winnipeggers have made a virtue of necessity. They have turned to the arts as a way of collectively fighting off boredom, and as a hallmark of their city. Spurred on by a spirit of mutuality, resistance (to the elements as well as to events), social conscience, radicalism and subversion, they have created, from nothing, the Winnipeg legend, the reverberations of which have reached as far as Paris.

Visitors are welcomed by an Ojibwa Indian lying on an old map of Paris. Of Anishinaabe origin, Robert Houle has turned his attention to an unusual cultural encounter: the discovery of Paris by a group of Ojibwe Indians, brought over by the American landscape artist George Catlin in 1845 for his *tableaux vivants* that would complement an exhibition of his paintings. In the *Paris/Ojibwa* project to which this drawing belongs, Houle imagines the amazement of these men and women who appeared before the court of King Louis-Philippe.

Noam Gonick’s film *Stryker* tells the story of another Aboriginal youth. An artist, scriptwriter, critic and exhibition curator (he is associate curator of *My Winnipeg’s* last section), Gonick filmed a bewildered young Aboriginal man turned arsonist, who runs away from Brokenhead, the reserve where he was born, and finds himself confronted with urban criminality. These location shots show an unidealised and very real facet of the Canadian city.

Native Fires, like the majority of **Wanda Koop’s** paintings, presents a “visual language” for us to decipher. A vast night-time landscape is a meditation on the chronology of North American civilisation: the fires of the Aboriginals, the first inhabitants of Winnipeg, which continue to burn on the banks of the Red River, a sacred site. These tears light up the landscape and reflect in the river. Standing out in the background are symbols of religious power (bell tower), political power (dome) and economic power (skyscraper).

There’s no place like home

Associate curator: Sigrid Dahle

“There’s no place like home” says Dorothy when she wakes up at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, whose characters surround Rosalie Favell, a Métis Winnipeg artist. Over the bed hangs a portrait of Louis Riel, a Métis politician who led two rebellions against the Canadian government to preserve the rights and culture of his people. He was eventually arrested and hanged. Favell’s artwork poses the question of a sense of belonging: where do we feel at home? In this first section, Sigrid Dahle, associate curator at Gallery One One One (at the University of Manitoba), presents a portrait of her city that combines history, geography, climatology, sociology, politics and art, to help us

determine what characterises a place that these artists consider or have considered their home.

In this densely hung room, artworks mingle indiscriminately with archive documents, photographs, reproductions, souvenirs and unpretentious postcards. They form an (incomplete and partial) portrait of the city and the characteristics that forge what Dahle calls its “Gothic Unconscious.” First its climate: long, hard winters (the average winter temperature is around -30°C and it can snow into April); floods in spring (Winnipeg is on a flood plain); mosquito infestations in summer, and frequent fires. The large black and white photographs are by **Lewis Benjamin Foote**, the best-known and most prolific of the city’s photographers who, throughout the first half of the 20th century, captured daily moments of Winnipeg life, but also its past and its painful social history: the exploitation of poor European and Asian immigrants, which led to the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919, regarded as the biggest and longest strike ever to take place in Canada, and perhaps even in North America. For over a month, more than 25,000 workers downed tools. The strike began peacefully but ended tragically with the death of two strikers following a charge by mounted police. It made Winnipeg the cradle of the North American Labour Movement.

Photos also illustrate outlandish moments in the city’s history, such as a fake Nazi invasion, organised for an entire day in 1942 to encourage the population to support the war effort. Winnipeg is also, in Guy Maddin’s eyes, a city of sleepwalkers, hypnotists and spiritualists. In fact, Manitoba means “where the spirits live” in the Cree language. At the turn of the 20th century, the city was a centre of spiritualism, thanks to **Thomas Glendenning Hamilton**, a doctor and distinguished figure in Winnipeg who was fascinated with the paranormal. In order to study the phenomena of séances, psychokinesis, ectoplasm and other materialisations of spirits, Hamilton equipped his home with a dozen cameras that would “capture” “spirits” in the act. Hamilton’s séances were so famous that Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of Sherlock Holmes who also had a keen interest in spiritualism, travelled to Winnipeg to attend them. The province of Manitoba has thousands of these photographs in its archives.

All these images have contributed to the visual culture of Winnipeg’s artists. One wall shows works by artists who taught at the University of Manitoba: **LeMoine FitzGerald**, a member of the Group of Seven and the school’s first Canadian director; but also **Robert Nelson** and **Ivan Eyre**, who introduced a surrealist vein that can be perceived in the art of their students (**Don Proch**, **Daniel Barrow**, Diana Thorneycroft) and their students’ students (Marcel Dzama and Neil Farber whose work is also exhibited).

By showing these documents and artworks in a setting that imitates a psychiatric consultation, Sigrid Dahle suggests that Winnipeg’s unconscious is haunted by this history and traumatic events, which have moulded a “proto-surrealist” sensibility. Their presence is an essential anteroom for our understanding of the imagination brought into play in the exhibition.

Red River, frozen lakes and interior landscapes

The diorama, a life-size replica of a scene that is frequently found in history and natural history museums, particularly in North America, is highly familiar to Winnipeg artists. The Manitoba Museum has several outstanding examples, including its famous bison hunting scenes. They aim to create a sense of reality; to give the visitor the impression of being part of what he is seeing. **Marcel Dzama** uses the diorama format for the opposite effect in *On the Banks of the Red River*. There is no attempt at verisimilitude in this presentation of men in 1950s suits shooting down winged creatures, which fall among various dead animals on the ground. The Red River which crosses Winnipeg literally becomes a river of blood. Reprising the scene from one of his drawings, *You Gotta Make Room for the New Ones*, **Dzama’s** diorama takes its inspiration from several sources: images from communist propaganda ballets and operas, in which the ballerinas danced dressed as soldiers armed with rifles; the colourful ceramics of Mexican religious art (the ceramic pieces in this installation were made in Guadalajara); and the boxes of artist Joseph Cornell. The work is about transition: the hunters are a figure of the artist “killing” the images that haunted his work during his years in Winnipeg (birds, bats, hybrid creatures, and flying heads), and which he eradicated from his drawings to make room for others (such as ballerinas and hooded soldiers) when he moved to New York in 2004.

The works facing the diorama are by the **Professional Native Indian Artists Inc.** Also known as the Indian Group of Seven, in reference to the famous group of Canadian landscape artists, this group of First Nations artists (**Jackson Beardy**, Eddy Cobiness, **Alex Janvier**, Norval Morrisseau, **Daphne Odjig**, **Carl Ray** and Joe Sanchez) championed First Nations cultures and the traditions that informed their art and sought to give them prominence in contemporary art. Characterised by bright colours and stylised images, their painted and drawn art visually interprets the fundamental elements of Aboriginal culture and especially its relationship to nature, in which landscapes, humans and animals are linked together by “lines of energy.” The works shown here are prints, a medium which the PNIA used to diffuse its work among the widest possible audience.

Kent Monkman’s diorama also addresses Aboriginal culture and its relationship with western culture. He projects us into a nineteenth-century, middle-class

European interior. Of Cree heritage, Monkman has invented his own alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testicle, a cross-dressing Native through whom he rephrases the history of colonisation in Canada. A painter first and foremost, he made his name with his hijacking of the sublime and picturesque landscapes of American painting of the late 19th century (Paul Kane, George Catlin) into which he inserts incongruous scenes of sex and violence between Europeans and First Nations. They tell a different history of colonisation, founded on sexual and identity oppression. *The Collapsing of Time and Space in an Ever-Expanding Universe* continues this theme of confrontation between two cultures, in a vast installation. The old world and the new, nature and culture intermingle in this luxurious interior, inhabited by the animals of the Canadian prairies. What is making Miss Chief Eagle Testicle cry? Nostalgia for the untamed nature she has left behind and which she finds in the painting before her? The beauty of the music she is hearing? Is she one of the Aboriginal persons that was carted off to Europe to be shown as curiosities in “human zoos” and other degrading spectacles?

William Eakin has a recurrent interest in “ordinary art.” He takes everyday objects, usually picked up in thrift stores (including the well-known “Value Village” chain), and restores their “nobility” in classic studio portraits. Here he takes a similar approach with photographs of the dead, taken in 2001 on the tombs of the San Michele Cemetery in Venice. By transposing these portraits onto canvas, all the same size, he erases the differences in age of the dearly departed, uniting them as though they were former classmates in a school reunion (hence the title). As with the objects he photographs, he saves these faces from oblivion and fading away... but for how long?

Guy Maddin is, with Marcel Dzama, undoubtedly Winnipeg's most important and best-known figure. He has made six feature-length films and seventeen short films since the late 1980s, all of which bear his hallmark: an aesthetic inspired by another time and full of cinematographic references (silent movies, expressionism, surrealism...) to portray improbable stories inspired by myths, poetry and fantasy. Guy Maddin has largely contributed to the Winnipeg legend, and his atypical cinema has become an emblem of the city's art. Indeed, the exhibition takes its name from the docu-fiction he made in 2007. Shown here in full (80 mins), *My Winnipeg* is a funny and touching reverie on his native city that mixes archive documents and contemporary sequences with historical facts, legends and personal accounts. Maddin guides us through his snow-covered, sleepy Winnipeg, the city he wants to leave without ever managing to tear himself away.

We pass from myth to the harshest reality with **Jeff Funnell's** video. In the accompanying drawings, he

delivers a personal and spontaneous chronicle of the inquest into the murder of a young Cree man by a policeman, which sparked an outcry in the early 1990s.

After a period of surrealist-inspired photography (shown in the final section of the exhibition) **Diana Thorneycroft** developed an interest in dioramas in 2001. In her *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* series, plastic figurines and dolls are presented in scenes against backgrounds of iconic landscapes by the Group of Seven (a group of Canadian outdoor landscape artists from the 1920s who painted in a Post-Impressionist vein), and tell stories that are rooted in the Canadian psyche. *Bob and Doug* refers to two characters from a popular 1980s TV show that caricatures two Canadian yokels whose main activity consists of drinking beer and telling dumb jokes: here they're so drunk they are oblivious to nightfall and their imminent devouring by wolves. Next to them, Winnie the Pooh, who owes his name to Winnipeg, finds himself in an awkward position.

The works of **Eleanor Bond** reflect on the future of our society with architectural representations which are like visions of utopia. In *The Spectre of Detroit Hangs over Winnipeg* the title is ominous, predicting that the capital of Manitoba will suffer the same industrial, then social and urban decline that devastated a city that had grown on the back of the car industry.

Sarah Anne Johnson has made a family tragedy the subject of her *House on Fire*. A surreal doll's house, doll-sized bronze sculptures, family photos and newspaper articles reworked in pencil and paint allow her to conjure up an event that took place in the 1950s, before she was even born, but which deeply affected her family and influenced her childhood. Treated for postpartum depression at a Montreal clinic (the Allen Memorial Institute), the artist's grandmother was, without consent, used as a guinea pig in experiments for the CIA to investigate drugs as brainwashing and interrogation tools. She was administered heavy doses of LSD and acid which left her psychotic and subject to hallucinations. Johnson tries to give visual form to what she imagines to be the psychic torments and disorders experienced by her grandmother, trapped in her body. Peculiar events take place inside an apparently normal house: a glance inside reveals its deep “abnormality.”

The videos in **Daniel Barrow's** *Winnipeg Babysitter* evoke the golden age of public access television in Winnipeg. At the end of the 1970s and throughout the 80s, private cable channels were legally obliged to give members of the public airtime. Teenagers, seniors groups, artists, aspiring singers, gays and others seized this opportunity to share their talent and creativity with an audience.

In 1875, a group of Icelandic emigrants settled on the western shore of Lake Winnipeg, close to what is now Gimli. Over a period of eight years, **Rob Kovitz** gathered fragments of texts and images of *Ice Fishing in Gimli* into a “book of metaphors of fishing and ice.” The hypnotic beauty of this wintry landscape, repeated over nearly 5,000 pages, is accompanied by a kind of interior monologue; an interlocking of quotations that flow from one page to the next in an interplay of free associations. This conceptual work is to Manitoba what Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* is to the Paris of the 19th century.

Behind the consultation table, **KC Adams’** photos show aerial views of Winnipeg. The snow erases colour to the point that they could be mistaken for black and white shots. The geometric shapes of urban features emerge from the white as though inked in, forming an almost abstract pattern.

The unlikely hybrid forms in the work of **Simon Hughes** combines elements from the vernacular culture of the prairies (log cabins, ice fishing, and stickers of Canadian woodsmen and Inuit) with references to lifestyles and contemporary culture (such as the utopian architecture of the geodesic dome at Expo 67 in Montreal, or junk food). His most recent work, *Red River Ice Jam* and *Frozen Forest*, sets up a humorous dialogue with the masters of abstract painting, Jackson Pollock and Kenneth Noland, while retaining naturalistic references. *Bicycle*, by the same artist, is a fantasy replica of the Super 8 films of his childhood, in which trusting - or reckless - parents urge their child to attempt a feat worthy of the early days of aviation.

In many of her sculptures, **Aganetha Dyck** takes ordinary objects as her starting point which she then transforms. Since 1991 she has been “working with” bees by placing various objects in their hives. Honeycomb superimposes itself around these objects to create an unfamiliarity: thus an American football helmet becomes an archaeological artefact.

Wanda Koop uses hockey goalkeeper masks as inspiration for the preliminary sketches for her giant paintings, combining them with the designs of traditional Chinese opera masks. The geometric shapes that allow no more than a glimpse of the eyes also suggest African masks and Indian body paintings. Thus the motif becomes an object of cultural syncretism.

The quarterly magazine **Border Crossings** has been reporting on the international activity of Winnipeg’s contemporary art since 1985. Richly illustrated and focusing equally on artists from Manitoba and all over the world, the magazine, which is edited by Meeka Walsh, has earned a solid reputation. Every issue of

Border Crossings since its inception are made available to visitors in the form of a mobile library with foldaway shelving and reading room, the work of Winnipeg architects Neil Minuk, Eduardo Aquino and Karen Shanski. An index lists articles published over nearly thirty years.

The patio hosts **Paul Butler’s** *Collage Party Pavilion*. An artist and director of The Other Gallery, a web-based, nomadic project, and a proponent of reverse pedagogy, Butler has been organising his “collage parties” all over the world since 1997. Like any party, they are about lots of people having fun, social interaction, music and beer. Butler, who supplies the material (mainly magazines) and tools, invites artists and anyone who wants to join in to try their hand at collage and to create new meanings through a clash of images from contemporary culture. For *My Winnipeg* at la maison rouge, he has worked with the Canadian designer **Craig Alun Smith** to imagine a table-cum-social sculpture. The collages on the wall around the patio are from the *Keyhole Project*, for which Guy Maddin asked Paul Butler to organise several collage parties that would help him find lines of thought for his next feature-length film, *Keyhole*, which is scheduled for release in autumn 2011.

Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan have worked together on films, videos and performances since 1989. Their feminist and lesbian activism is at the centre of a body of work in which they overturn stereotyped representations of women with humour. Dressed as park rangers, their gaze is turned towards an abstract work by Alex Janvier, a member of PNIA Inc.

Now based in Toronto, **Shary Boyle** lived in Winnipeg for several years. Her work, whether small porcelain sculptures, drawings, or performances, focuses largely on the female figure, as the starting point for narratives with mythological, surrealist or erotic undertones. She has developed an original style of performance in which she uses an overhead projector to bring to life drawings on transparencies to musical accompaniment. Though old-fashioned, the technique has a magical effect.

The Royal Art Lodge: a collective and individualities

The Royal Art Lodge is an artists’ collective, established in 1996 by six young art students at the University of Manitoba: Michael Dumontier, Marcel Dzama, Neil Farber, Drue Langlois, Jon Pylypchuk and Adrian Williams, joined at one time by the siblings of two of the members, Hollie Dzama and Myles Langlois. For several years, the group would meet every Wednesday evening in a communal studio to draw together, or just to meet and discuss art over a beer. Most of their works were collages or small drawings, made quickly in a deliberately naive,

sometimes even childish, style. Many were the work of several members who each responded in turn to the drawing of the previous one. Although unsigned, they were date-stamped once they were considered finished. This anonymous mark paradoxically functions as a unifying feature of the work and shows how regularly the RAL met. In addition to the many drawings, there were also videos, sculptures, musical compositions, puppets and costumes. Their world was inhabited by hybrid characters inspired by the cartoon strips, science fiction, film noir, horror movies and television (such as *The Muppet Show*) in which the artists were immersed throughout their childhood and adolescence. The RAL met regularly from 1996 to 2003. After 2003, only Michael Dumontier, Neil Farber and Marcel Dzama continued to create together until the RAL officially disbanded in 2008. Each of the members pursued their own individual career parallel to this collaborative work.

Marcel Dzama's drawings, already shown at la maison rouge, are distinctive for their brown colours (tinted with root beer) and hybrid characters. A small projection room has been set up to show his film *The Lotus Eaters*. It tells the story of a man (played by the artist's father), who is haunted by his past and by his own creation. Entering a parallel world in search of his dead wife, he is confronted creatures that have escaped from his drawings. As well as the visual references to his own drawings, and to the cinema of Méliès, the film alludes to literary sources: the *Divine Comedy*, which is a constant reference in Dzama's work, but also the *Odyssey* of Ulysses which gives the work its title: *The Lotus Eaters* refers to the lotophagi who offer Ulysses' sailors lotus to eat, causing them to lose their memories and therefore the desire to return home. Made shortly after leaving Winnipeg for New York, where Dzama still lives, the film has an autobiographical flavour to it.

Jon Pylypchuk uses reclaimed materials in his paintings as well as his sculptures, making art whose aesthetic flirts with art brut. Anthropomorphic creatures in synthetic fur are shown in situations whose meaning often escapes us, but which nonetheless seem critical, even desperate. The titles function like dialogues in a strip cartoon, and shed light on the situations of disappointment, anxiety or threat which the characters endure.

The collages, drawings, installations and sculptures of **Michael Dumontier** stand out for their economy of means, their elegance and small size. Unlike works by other members of the RAL, his are rarely narrative. Elements taken from daily life (matches, pencils, buttons, etc.) become powerful graphic signs. Dumontier still works with Farber: they carry on the "drawing games" inherited from RAL's day and which are still frequent in the Winnipeg art world. In *Unidenticals*, they draw together every few months

(the time it takes to forget what they previously drew), on two sets of prepared backgrounds and then compare the two series.

Adrian Williams, now based in Berlin, works essentially with reclaimed materials, notably the covers and insides of old books which he collects. *The Nervous Bellhop* takes us into a doll's house-hotel and reveals the dysfunctional life going on inside.

Works by **Neil Farber** come under two categories. Some are inhabited by childlike figures, half-human, half-animal, such as *New Fosston*, in which the artist imagines the foundation of a new town (Fosston is the name of a small town in Saskatchewan) by a group of strange pioneers. *Manny*, a small sculpture that greets visitors, seems to come straight out of this community. Other works, whose subject is repetition, literally swarm with identical, rather old-fashioned-looking figures, as in *Little Town of Georgia Street*.

Hauntings by Guy Maddin

Hauntings is a recent installation by Guy Maddin, shown for the first time at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2010. "Cinema is a haunted medium," he tells us, "a projection of people, places and things not really present. As we know a film can summon before our eyes, like ghosts invoked from beyond, performances from the past, gestures by actors no longer with us, in settings changed forever. But when a movie is lost, as so many great works from the medium's earliest years are, it's a double haunting, for a misplaced film is an artwork consigned to limbo, a narrative with no known final resting place." Summoning F.W. Murnau, Fritz Lang, Hollis Frampton, Victor Sjöström, Jean Vigo, Kenji Mizoguchi and Josef von Sternberg among others, Guy Maddin resuscitates eleven films by important directors that were believed to be lost, unfinished or abandoned. Retranscribed and replayed, he rescues from limbo films that have haunted the history of cinema, and his own imagination.

Winter Kept Us Warm

Associate curator: Noam Gonick

In this section, for adults only, Noam Gonick, nicknamed the "baron of the night" by Guy Maddin, has assembled a selection of artworks that show a different aspect of the city: the Winnipeg of the night, of desire and eroticism, flesh and fantasies, as explored by artists who have centred their work around these themes, or by others for whom this aspect is more private or anecdotal. With a certain taste for provocation, he reveals another aspect of the city's vitality and creativity, behind closed doors.

“Each wave of cold is met with a soothing wave of warmth, taking diverse forms, but tinged with eroticism,” Gonick tells us. Under so many layers of clothes, desire is aroused and calls for friction between bodies. Gonick explores every possible permutation of these “encounters” between the two sexes, which during Winnipeg’s long winter months amount to a survival strategy: women desiring women (Dempsey and Millan.), men desiring men (Asmundson), women desiring men (Mélanie Rocan), and men desiring women (Louis Bako), and on and on in this long spiral of desire.

As this journey draws to a close, we ask ourselves if, ultimately, these long winters are in fact Winnipeg’s great luxury. They encourage withdrawal, alone or in a group, to get warm, talk, create. They offer artists an invaluable commodity: time, and little going on to break the thread of thoughts and creativity. Says Sarah Anne Johnson: “Winnipeg is full of nothing, and nothing is full of possibility.”