



Playing In Alleys

Perreault's urban scenes exclude humans but exude humanity | by Gregory Beatty



ART
WILF PERREAULT:
IN THE ALLEY
MACKENZIE GALLERY
UNTIL JAN. 4

When I was a kid growing up on 12 block Queen St. in north central, I spent tons of time in the alley. With hardly any traffic to interrupt us, and wooden garages to bounce passes off (and body-check opponents into) it was a great place to play shinny. And in summer you could throw a baseball or football around — and crabapples too, when turf wars erupted with neighbourhood kids.

I also spent 20-plus years visiting family and later living in a house on Victoria Ave. in the Cathedral Village. T-junction alleys abound there, and when you're walking they provide handy short-cuts.

Oh yeah, and for nearly nine years I've lived and worked downtown. And I use back alleys regularly when I'm on foot. So to me, the central subject of this exhibition by Saskatchewan artist Wilf Perreault is *terra cognita*. But for reasons I'll discuss later, there's plenty of Regina's who don't share my familiarity with the alleys Perreault depicts in his acrylic and watercolour paintings.

In the Alley consists of 60 works dating back to 1976. The exhibition, which was curated by Timothy Long, is accompanied by a gorgeous coffee-table-style catalogue published by Coteau Books. Scores of colour reproductions, along with shots from the Perreault family archive, are included in its 225 pages. In addition to a critical essay by Long, there's 11 prose pieces by Saskatchewan writ-

ers responding to Perreault's work.

There's French translations of all the texts, which is appropriate, given Perreault's roots in the Fransaskois community. In his essay, Long recounts how Perreault displayed early talent as an artist, and when his family moved to Saskatoon in 1953 and he found himself struggling to keep up in English in grade two, he used drawing to attract attention from teachers and students.

Encouraged by his parents Armand and Eveline, Perreault took art classes as a youth from established Saskatoon artists Herb Wilde, Bill Epp and Louise Malkin. While pursuing his fine arts degree at the University of Saskatchewan, he studied under Reta Cowley, Eli Bornstein, Wynona Mulcaster, Otto Rogers and others.

Modernism was in full-swing in Saskatoon then, so formal elements such as colour, line, mass, texture and shape were emphasized over subject matter. For a time, Perreault even switched from painting to sculpture, producing large-scale welded steel works — one of which has adorned the Mendel Gallery grounds since its purchase in 1969.

After graduating in 1971, Perreault and his wife Sandi moved to Regina where he took a job teaching art at O'Neill High School. With limited space to work at home, Long notes, he switched back to painting.

That wasn't Regina's only impact on Perreault's career. Like Saskatoon, it had once been a modernist hotbed — especially during the Regina Five's heyday. By the time Perreault arrived there'd been a changing of the guard, and artists such as Joe Fafard, David Thauberger, Russ Yuristy and Vic Cicansky were in ascendance. Ceramics was his full-

art was a major influence, and the California Funk of David Gilhooly injected some whimsical humour.

As Perreault came to know these artists, he struggled to balance his modernist training with a new-found interest in what they were doing. A breakthrough came shortly after his arrival in Regina when he started wandering the back alleys with his camera, taking photos that he'd later use in the studio for inspiration.

Why back alleys? Well, why not? In Perreault's skilled hands, the images are exquisitely rendered. And depicting alleys in all four seasons gave him ample opportunity to play up formalist elements in pools of rain and snow melt, autumn leaves, and the effects of sun and moonlight.

Many of the paintings are big — some up to 7' x 11', which is perhaps another nod to modernism. But when you stand in front of them you can really enter the work. That's true also of a 150-foot diorama that Perreault did especially for this show that surrounds you in the gallery.

Conceptually, there's stuff going on, too. When prairie towns were being built in the late 19th century, false front architecture was common. It was important to make a good impression, so building fronts were treated as showcases, while the backs were strictly functional to save on construction and maintenance costs.

Alleys are a portal to that world, where the dirty part of urban living — such as garbage pick-up, delivery of utilities and whatnot — happens. It's also where the detritus of our consumer culture such as junked cars and grotty furniture accumulates — in certain neighbourhoods, anyway.

Which brings me back to the point that not all Regina's will share my familiarity with Perreault's alleys. Typically, they're found in the older parts of cities. Starting in the 1950s, our growing reliance on motor vehicles became an important factor in urban planning, with ever more remote subdivisions being built where people commuted exclusively by car.

To make coming and going easier from isolated crescents and bays, garages and driveways fronted the street, and back alleys were deemed unnecessary by urban planners. So arguably, Perreault's paintings champion a more people-centred, as opposed to vehicle-centred, way of life.

Overall, in fact, he probably presents an idealized vision of back alleys. Yes, there's grit and grime — *Potholes* (1979) is especially striking in its depiction of derelict vehicles, junked furniture (and potholes). But absent any evidence of dog shit, graffiti, broken bottles and maybe even the odd arson-scorched garbage bin, most works have a romanticized tinge.

And one other thing. There's no people! There's signs of habitation, sure, such as lights in windows at night or footprints and tire tracks in snow. But no flesh and blood (or at least acrylic and watercolour) people.

Which is eerie when you think about it. Or maybe it's just a sign of the times? ☐