

ENTERTAINMENT

VISUAL ART

Puckish takes on Canada's sport

From familiar kitsch to wry conceptualism, an exhibit re-examines our affair with hockey

MURRAY WHYTE
VISUAL ARTS REPORTER

In his introduction to the catalogue for *Arena: The Art of Hockey*, which opened at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art this week, curator Ray Cronin allows himself a moment of sheepish self-recrimination: "I'm wary about trotting out too many clichés, but art needs to communicate with viewers . . ." he writes. "This exhibition provides the opportunity for the artists included to communicate with a large audience predisposed to listen."

Which, I suppose, is a gentler way of pointing out that, in the mostly siloed-off realms of contemporary art and sport, crossover is about as frequent or as likely as, say, the high school nerd dating the cheerleader.

The product of this kind of crossover, on the odd occasion when it occurs, can run the gamut from bluntly jockish notions of art to over-intellectualized readings of an activity that, for most of us, is simple, brutish and plainly riveting.

Cronin, the director of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, has an appreciation of this range, and self-consciously included its breadth when the show was first mounted in Halifax last year. Alongside such totemic hockey art clichés as Joe Fafard's folksy sculptures of hockey icons like Henri Richard, and Ken Danby's *At the Crease*, which is probably the best-known image in the entire canon of hockey-based art (such as it is), Cronin included work by such complex conceptualists as Vancouver's Tim Lee and Montreal's Jean-Pierre Gauthier.

The tension is palpable, and that must be the point. Tim Lee, a Sobey Art Award winner now working in Berlin, offers a diptych of himself suspended in mid-air in the iconic pose of Bobby Orr as he dove through the crease after his Stanley Cup-winning goal against the St. Louis Blues in 1970.

The Orr photo is one of the game's most famous, recognizable images. Lee's retake, though, is reversed. It seems the artist is saying something about the nature of iconography and fallible memories when we reconstruct our personal histories through mass media documentation of collective moments of significance. A clever cultural critique, I guess, but unless a complete neutering of those moments' impact is part of the intent (and it might be), it's at best a chilly, oblique piece in which the joke is on you.

Meanwhile, Gauthier, another Sobey winner, offers a quirkily compelling piece in which two sticks and a puck are locked in a permanent, automated faceoff thanks to some rudimentary robotics. As the sticks jerkily attempt to gain the puck, three tiny screens dangle in front of them; a camera is fitted to each stick and the puck, so you can watch the entire awkward affair from multiple perspectives.

There's something here, clearly, about how we as the general public — at least, those of us who don't have Leafs season tickets bequeathed to us in a multi-generational inheritance structure — interact with the spectacle of professional sports. Naturally, it's from a mediated distance, usually via the surfeit of all-sports cable channels and rapidly proliferating online streaming options. Gauthier, in his deliberately crude, homespun way, makes our mostly mediated experience of our professed national passion painfully clear.



So that's the high-low assessment of *Arena*, which opened at MOCCA Thursday night. This instalment, sadly, is missing the low — neither Fafard's nor Danby's work made the trip from Halifax; I suspect that's why the subtitle of the exhibition at MOCCA is "Road Game." But there's plenty in between, too, that addresses the game's significance, its role in our culture, and our often irrational passion for it.

Take Toronto sculptor James Carl's piece, *The Original Six*, in which a cartoon cut-out of the Stanley Cup is surrounded by six similarly sized cigarette lighters in the colours of the NHL's founding teams. For Carl, whose career centres on disposable material culture juxtaposed with the nature of icons, it's a nice fit for the show and representative of his work, with very real passions embodied by mass-trinketeering and throwaway junk.

Diana Thorneycroft's works, photographs of meticulously crafted dioramas, are also represented here; the most relevant is her *Martyrdom of the Great One*, in which an Oilers-era Wayne Gretzky doll is crucified against a sublime Albertan alpine landscape, surrounded by lions.

He died, of course — as an Oiler, at least — for the business sins of then-owner Peter Pocklington, who forced Gretzky's trade to the Los Angeles Kings in 1989. Here, Thorneycroft's hyperbole is spot on as she conflates the status of supremely gifted athlete with that of the Christian saviour himself (though unlike Theoren Fleury, the pint-sized Calgary Flames Judas who's attempting a comeback at 41, Gretz won't be resurrected in Oilers silks anytime soon).

Even lacking the obvious in Danby, there's no shortage of overtly sentimental glorification here, though it's quietly subtle and unique. I'm thinking of the haunting stillness of Scott Conarroe's photos of vacant outdoor rinks in summer, when they sit idly awaiting the cold, or Graeme Patterson's stirring stop-motion animation of games both real and imagined.



Imagined, in Patterson's film *Woodrow*, about his tiny, dying Saskatchewan hometown, where the ghosts of a team past take on a rival town; and real in the piece he's showing at MOCCA, about the classic 1976 contest between the Leafs and the Boston Bruins when Leafs captain Darryl Sittler registered his still-standing record of 10 points in one game. The piece features narration by Sittler himself, who, in what must be a first in a contemporary

art museum, attended the opening Thursday as a guest of honour.

There are other works here — portraits of goalie masks by Winnipeg painter Wanda Koop that are, frankly, beneath her; the same Charlie Pachter renderings of the Leafs and Montreal Canadiens we've all seen a thousand times — but there's one I must mention.

It's by Ron Terada, who often works in high-conceptualist form with language and found signs. I

suppose one could easily reason his piece here into similar form: it's an indistinct, offset print of a photo of a skeleton in a chair on a front lawn, wearing a Leafs jersey. Beside it is a sign: "Leaf fan waiting for Cup."

There's something being said here, about obsessive fandom and overidentification with, or against, your team, but the Calgary Flames fan in me just wants to drop the high and take the low at face value here for what it is: pure joy.

In Diana Thorneycroft's *Martyrdom of the Great One*, above, a Gretzky doll is crucified against an alpine backdrop.

Left, artist Tim Lee poses like Bobby Orr in a famous Stanley Cup photo from 1970.

Below, Ron Terada's ossified Leafs fan waiting for the Cup: comment on obsessive fandom, or pure schadenfreude?