Puckish takes on Canada's sport

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

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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 Goodwin takes off the first-person moment of sheepish self-recrimination: “I’m sorry about trampling on too many cliches, 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 gentle way of pointing out that in the mostly sold-out run of contemporary art and sport, crossover is 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 blantly jokish notions of art to over-intellectualized readings of an activity that for most of us, is simple, heartfelt and plainly riveting.

Cronos, the director of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, has an appreciation of this range, and self-consciously included his breadth when the show was first mounted in Halifax last year. Alongside such totemic hockey art cliches as Joe Paffenroth’s folk sculpture of hockey icons like Henri Richard, and Ken Darby’s Air the Crease, which is probably the best-known image in the entire canon of hockey-based art (such as it is), Cronos included work by such complex conceptualists as Toronto’s Tim Lee and Montreal’s Jean-Pierre Fautrier.

The tension is palpable, and that must be the point. Tim Lee, a sofa artist whose work is working in Berlin, offers a dipthych of himself suspended in mid-air in the iconic pose of Bobby Orr as he dove through the crossbar 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 reveals our truest, most gutting moment of exposure, of being seen. In this case, it’s art. It’s saying something about the nature of iconography and palimpsest memories when we reconstruct our personal histories through mass media documentation of collective moments of significance. As a cultural cultural critique, I guess, but unless a complete neutrality of these two forces can be part of the intent (and it might be), it’s at best a chollic piece in which the joke is on us.

Meanwhile, Gauthier, another So- bey winner, offers a quietly compelling piece in which two sticks and a puck are locked in a permanent, automated furrows thanks to some rudimentary robotics. As the sticks jostle attempt to gain the puck, three tiny screens dance in front of them; a camera is fitted to each stick and the puck, so you can watch the entire adversarial affair from multiple perspectives.

There’s something here, dearly, about how art is the general art, at least, those of us who don’t have Leafs season tickets be- quested to us in a multi-genera- tion inheritance structure — in- cluding the familial and the profes- sional sports. Naturally, it’s from a mediated distance, usually via the Internet, the cybersphere and rapidly proliferating online streaming options. Gauthier’s is a less formally crude, human-scale move, makes us our own modulated experience of the mediated national passion painlessly clear.

So that’s the high-low assessment of Arena, which opened at MOCCA Thursday night. This community, sadly, is missing the low — neither Paffenroth’s nor Darby’s work made the trip from Halifax; I suspect that’s why the subtitle of the exhibition at MOCCA is “Road Games.” But there’s plenty in between, too, that addresses the game’s significance, in 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-styled figurative lightboxes 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 fit for the show and representative of his work, with very real passions embodied by mass-fabrication and throwaway junk.

Diana Thorncroft’s work, photographs of meticulously crafted di- oramas, are also represented here; the most relevant is her Martyrology of the Great One, in which an Oshawa Wayne Gretzky doll is crucified against a sublime Alberton alpine landscape, surrounded by lans.

He died, of course — as an Oiler, at least, for the business side of then-owner Peter Pocklington, who forced Gretzky’s trade to the Los Angeles Kings in 1988. Here, Thorncroft’s hypothesis is spot on as she conflates the status of a supremely gifted athlete with that of the Christian saviour himself (though unlike Theodos Fleru’s, the stunt-sized Calgary Flames Judas who’s attemptimg comeback at 41, Gretz won’t be resurrected in Oil- ers Silk anytime soon).

Even lacking the obvious in Dan- by, 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 Cowan’s photos of vacant outdoor rinks in summer, when they sit idly wait- ing for the cold, or Ginnie Patterson’s stirring stop-motion animation of game both real and imagined, imagined in Patterson’s film Woodrow, about his tiny flying Saskatchewan hometown, where the ghosts of a hockey arena was a town, and real in the piece he’s showing at MOCCA, about the clas- sic 1976 coast-to-coast 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 a narra- tion 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 — por- traits of goalies masks by Winnipeg painter Wanda Koop that are, frankly, beneath her; the same Charlie Pedlar renderings of the Leafs and Montreal Canadiens we’ve all seen a thousand times — but there’s something missing.

It’s by Ron Teeda, who often works in high-conceptualism form with language and found signs. I suppose one could easily reason his piece here into similar forms it’s an indistinct, offset print of a photo of the 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.