

Notes on Systems, with Winnipeg in Mind

In recent years Winnipeg has had its reputation, at least in the visual arts, blossom internationally. With high profile group exhibitions in Ottawa, New York, San Francisco and Paris, artists from our prairie city have been talked about like never before. These exhibitions have favoured place over anything else, and brought artists together (again) based principally on where they come from/where they live, sometimes cobbling together disparate themes. For CV2's Winnipeg Issue, I have gathered work by a small collection of Winnipeg artists with more than place in mind. The specific selection of work by Karen Asher, Steven Leyden Cochrane, Derek Dunlop, Dave Grywinski, Divya Mehra, Freya Bjorg Olafson, Nicole Shimonek and Collin Zipp references interpretations of systems of classification. This selection is not meant to be definitive or even exploratory of these artists' individual practices, but instead fulfills a certain slant of research, rounds out a conversation, blurs a context.

I begin with curtains. Looking outward is an apt metaphor for life on the Prairies. Recent Winnipeg import **Steven Leyden Cochrane** has created a similitude of colour that reminds him of a sunset in his native Tampa. The electric green, crushed velvet fabric that comprises the 2011 installation, *Curtain to reproduce a quality of interior light characteristic of central Florida at sunset after a thunderstorm in summer* (page 49) when hit by light (natural and fabricated) provides a sense of other, a simulacrum of various memories and events experienced in his formative years. It is, like so much contemporary art, a ghost; or perhaps a glowing sentinel. Beyond this shocking colour is something different dependent on the viewer: promise, disdain, and everything in between, from Manitoba to Florida and beyond. A curtain is meant to shield and shelter, to obscure and to conceal, but in Cochrane's hands does the opposite. This is a personal system, recreated through collective memory.

However, memory, especially with cultural associations through language (aural, written, and digital) becomes transferred. So how do systems of identification persist in a share-all world? For close to a decade, **Freya Bjorg Olafson** has occupied a hybrid position in the Winnipeg arts scene as a contemporary dancer, visual artist and multi-media performer. Her 2007 collage *Is it mine or yours?* (page 50) blurs the lines of distinction from the personal to the political when we look closely at the exchange her characters are having: one of her two pen and ink sketched androgynies is engulfed in a black ball of fur (literally rabbit fur) while its companion extends a hand outward, holding a much smaller ball of the same material. With this humorous work, not only is Olafson blurring boundaries of identification, but subsequently representations of clas-

sification: when two are contained, the stuff of one is obscured and becomes shared. In this sense, we share to reinforce who we are and how we got there.

Working with received ideas from the pages of the ubiquitous *National Geographic Magazine*, **Collin Zipp** has photographed two-page spreads illustrating various articles pertaining to—what else—cultural stereotypes and supposed reportage from around the world. In particular, his *A Modern Community with Family Quarters* (page 51) from 2010 offers a skewed surface-level perception of domesticity on the prairies. The crooked lines of modular homes captured with Zipp's out-of-focus lens forces the viewer to reconcile fact from outpost utopian ideal. From the muted brown of exposed dirt merging with the off-white of fallen snow, this source image offers more in terms of how to read a system. The overarching focal point in this image (as well as through his entire series) is the very evident gutter fold, or original magazine margin seam that vertically bisects the photo. Originally designed to obstruct the image the least possible, behind Zipp's lens the fold is unmistakable and even pronounced as an integral part of the work. This is the magician pulling back the curtain, showing his audience the once concealed intricacies of his act. Here, the artist is not tongue-in-cheek, but shit-eating-grin, playing off our inherited notions of: photography, documentation, artwork, representation, nostalgia, reportage, and perhaps even truth. To go further, this particular image boasts layer upon layer of systems, from environmental to social.

Derek Dunlop takes a historical reading of systems of classification. His painting *Back to Back* (page 52) from 2010 revises and abstracts an interpretation of the persecution and execution of queers in Nazi's Germany concentration camps. A couple of demi-circles in harsh black pigment against an equal amount of asymmetrical pink ovals on a blue background are positioned with their round ends facing one another while three more identical shapes wait in line as either firing squad or foregone victims. In this interpretation, the system is delineated by shape and colour, just as similar markers were used historically to classify and denigrate various groupings of society. Dunlop offers a contemporary gesture of memorial and attempted understanding of past trauma, in considering the atrocious possibilities in systems of classification. The uneven ground of his canvas occupies a penetrable and porous boundary where pigment does not cover the entire surface, alluding to possible outcomes—further conflating the personal and political, underscoring symbolism of what became could very well be a marker for what is, and what is to come.

In a young career with several accomplishments, **Karen Asher** has managed to undo so much of what her artistic predecessors have done by way of serial groupings. In her handful of series, Asher obfuscates boundaries of classification so that images she produces through her camera have less to do with chro-

nology than typology. Her recent work, *Martin* (2012) and *Grass* (2012) (page 53) from the series *Macho/Nature*, further obscures subject with nomenclature when we realize that in one image the couple shot are contorted so that one head rests atop both torsos, their clothing mismatching but mingling to further distort the reading of two people rather than one entity. Asher pairs this non-traditional portrait with a landscape image of wild prairie grasses, locating the couple among the trampled but intrepid land that continues to thrive even with bent and wilted crop under the ominous dark blue sky.

In another kind of pairing, *CHURCH+STATE* (page 54), the photographic series by **Dave Grywinski**, offers an ostensibly diametrically opposed coupling of imagery—the sanctity of a Ukrainian Orthodox cathedral and the hallowed ground of the dancefloor at The Albert (a Winnipeg punk bar with a deserved and venerable reputation). On the left, the altar boys walk in a single line procession, candles in hand glowing orange against their white robes. We automatically think of the taxonomy of religion. On the right, a black and white image of a moshpit where the singer from the band has come down to trounce the crowd, who look on, in turn ecstatic and bored; this is a religious experience of a different sort. Through his exhaustive series of pairing, of which we only see one here, Grywinski explores the nuances of sacred and profane pageantry, of systems that allow for pomp and circumstance above all else, often in the name of something other worldly.

In her recent series of watercolours (page 55), **Nicole Shimonek** interprets coyotes. Historically known for their lone hunting, in recent years coyotes have begun to breed with wolves, resulting in a fierce creature that is not afraid of the urban environment and prone to hunting in packs. This is where notoriety is placed on a group for exhibiting less than positive attributes. However, Shimonek is not interested in the hype and fear mongering, or the obvious correlations to fairy tales where coyotes (or wolves) are stand-ins for the bad guy. Instead, the artist looks to the coyote as ideal, as a survivor, placing upon them the distinction of going beyond systems in order to maintain their course.

I conclude with a declarative statement. *The catalyst for change so often in history is War* (page 56) is a text work by **Divya Mehra** and would best be read in relation to spotlight syndrome and perhaps even false modesty. Originally produced in 2010 in mural format as part of a larger body of work titled *TURF WAR*, it is revisited here for *CV2*. Taking up a third of the horizontal page with blue ground featuring white text in a font strikingly similar to that found on facebook, the artist states: “I don’t want to be friends.” With so much attention paid to Winnipeg lately, this declaration is proving prescient. Now that more and more people know of us and our prowess has gained international attention, we can be choosy with which requests to accept and which to decline

like never before. Mehra has borrowed the title for this work from the historian Michael Wood as he spoke about the devastating outcome that divided the subcontinent and created two new nations from one as part of the Partition in 1947: Pakistan and the Republic of India. In this brutal analysis of systems, we see the translation of geography as ideology, whether in terms of tangible or digital properties.

What I have attempted in this gathering of imagery is to illustrate systems of edification—of how and when we become who or what we are, more closely how this is seen or understood (and subsequently reinforced) in the eyes of others. . . this is what it can mean to be classified, systematized, ghettoized, corralled and even anthologized.