

Joe Fafard The Bronze Years

Paula Gustafson

Number 38, Winter 1996–1997

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9803ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Gustafson, P. (1996). Joe Fafard: The Bronze Years. *Espace Sculpture*, (38), 32–34.

Joe Fafard

THE BRONZE YEARS

Paula Gustafson



Joe Fafard, *Sam I*, 1993.
Stainless steel, painted,
7/10, 13.7 x 13 cm.
Collection of the artist.
Photo: Courtesy The
Montreal Museum of Fine
Arts.

On the Prairies, cows are ubiquitous reference points. In a flattened landscape punctuated only by occasional bursts of trees, the slow-moving figures of cows serve as landmarks; something to look at, something to measure against sky and horizon. Perhaps that's why, again and again, internationally acclaimed sculptor Joe Fafard has used cows as both a method for working and metaphor that keeps his imagery firmly planted on familiar terrain.

The sixth of twelve children born to a French-Canadian Catholic farming family in Ste. Marthe, Saskatchewan, a small village founded by his grandparents near the Manitoba border, Fafard grew up within the milieu of a dynamic but geographically and linguistically isolated community where his father ran the general store. At 21 he enrolled at the University of Manitoba. He earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1966, and a MFA from Pennsylvania State College in 1968. Returning home, he taught sculpture for six years at the University of Saskatchewan in Regina. In 1974, disgusted with the elitism of university politics and particularly the art department's emphasis on Greenbergian modernism—and aware of his need to accommodate his own growing family—he relocated to the nearby town of Pense and set up a sculpture studio. Except for a brief teaching session in 1980 at the University of California at Davis, he remained in Pense for the next 12 years.

Recognizing this circular journey, from the close-knit life of a rural village to the big, nasty world of academia and then back to a small Prairie town, is integral to understanding Fafard as an outsider, self-alienated from mainstream art. His journey is evident in the subjects he has consistently chosen to sculpt: the people of Pense; his artist friends; famous artists such as Picasso, Van Gogh, Cézanne, and Matisse—and cows.

Described variously as a populist and a regional artist—and sometimes mythologized as the poor farm boy who escapes from the sticks, gets educated, comes home, and suddenly becomes a national art hero—Fafard is all and none of these.



A more critical factor in Fafard's career development was that, in the 1970s, the University of Saskatchewan's Regina campus was reverberating from the influence of U.S. ceramicist David Gilhooly, who taught there between 1969-1971. Gilhooly, acclaimed for his sybaritic and sensuous Fred Frog sculptures which poked fun at American consumerism, was also a major influence in the career of Fafard's buddy and fellow University of Saskatchewan ceramics instructor Vic Cicansky, who had worked as a teaching assistant for Gilhooly at the University of California at Davis.

self as Elvis Presley, Vincent Van Gogh, and other famous people—and the simultaneous explosion of ceramic activism in and around Calgary, Banff, and the Archie Bray Foundation in Montana—all fostered a climate of individualism that gave permission to employ clay in the service of social commentary. Gilhooly's frogs satirized hedonistic human foibles in disrespectful and often sexually explicit tableaux. Arneson reflected the "me" decade's self-interest, first expressing personal emotional anxieties in self-portraiture, then slyly using his own

muscle and the bone structure and the way the hide can be seen to contain all those juices. Working on bones and volumes and experimenting with glazes is an abstract problem, as abstract as any sculpture."

With typical dry humor, Fafard expanded on his continuing use of cows to explore spatial ideas in a *Border Crossings* interview with Robert Fulford focusing on the artists' 10-year survey exhibition *Cows and Other Luminaries* shown in 1987 at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon and the Dunlop Gallery in

Joe Fafard, *The Pasture*, 1984-1985. Bronze, 7 units, 140 x 290 x 150 cm each. The Cadillac Fairview Corporation Limited. Photo: Courtesy The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



The relationship between these three men, and their working connections to the hotbed of ceramic innovation in California, spearheaded by the now legendary Peter Voulkos and Paul Soldner, augmented by Robert Arneson's highly publicized antics surrounding his life-size ceramic bust series portraying him-

visage to caricature well-known personalities and artists (a form of parody which Andy Warhol was then reinventing in silkscreen format).

Fafard made his first cows in 1969. In an interview published in *Time* magazine in 1973, he explained that he chose cows "because I like their big, hulking size, the

Regina: "Generally the cow has been...a motif for solving sculptural problems. It's a totally elastic thing that you can stretch in one direction or the other, and you'll never find cow critics complain, either. They'll never comment. Human beings are not so

Joe Fafard, *My Picasso*, 1981. Clay, glazed and painted. 46.1 x 26.3 x 33.5 cm. Collection of the artist. Photo: Courtesy The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



elastic: they fight back.”

Earlier in the conversation with Fulford, Fafard had explained that he didn't set problems for himself; he discovered them. “For example, in dealing with flatness in the sculptures. It first occurred to me in 1980, and here we are in 1987 and I'm still trying to discover all the possible variations on that idea. I'm not interested in simply using old solutions to that problem: I want to invest the problem with

new life and to go further than I've gone before with it.”

Given licence to play with clay's modelling qualities, Fafard had fashioned perceptive folk art sculptures of friends and townfolk. In 1980, he created his first foreshortened ceramic portrait of someone outside his immediate circle. It was a flat-headed depiction of Clement Greenberg. He subsequently produced three more versions of the New York art critic who promulgated the lockstep march toward flat painting. Pleased with the irony of using the humble “craft” materiality of clay to critique high art's icons, Fafard produced a series of cows in telescoped perspective. As exercises in perceptual distortion, these ceramic sculptures of, for instance, resting bulls viewed from the rear, set Fafard on a path leading directly to the current exhibition, *The Bronze Years*, at The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The bronze-casting foundry built by Fafard in Pense in 1985 released him from the structural limitations and uncertainties of constructing clay sculptures, and provided another opportunity to collaborate with his long-time friend Vic Cicansky (who, coincidentally, is also one of 12 children). While bronze casting and patinating presented a new set of problems to be solved, the metal permitted a delicacy that both Cicansky and Fafard relish. Although their work is very different—Cicansky's imagery remains rooted in Funk and Folk—they often participate in joint exhibitions and maintain what they call “a friendly competition” that keeps each other on their toes.

More recently, since the installation of laser-cutting equipment in his studio (not to mention the six technicians he has trained over the years to help him), Fafard's oeuvre has again expanded to include life-size standing figures of cows, calves, bulls, and horses cut out of steel. Line-drawn bronze figures, such as *Bosseur* (1991), which he describes as “a drawing, standing up,” are cast in an edition of three. Laser-cut and painted stainless steel figures such as the bull

Clarence, like the screen-prints Fafard occasionally turns his hand to, can be reproduced in larger editions.

Now one of Canada's best known and respected sculptors, Fafard, 54, hasn't lost any of his edginess about art world pretensions. In conversation he is almost dismissive about past successes, preferring to talk about future work he has been commissioned to make and uneasily suggesting he hopes he “can last”. Sending his sculptures off to exhibitions, he says, gives him a chance to sweep out the studio. ■

Joe Fafard: *The Bronze Years*
The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
November 21, 1996 – February 16, 1997

L'auteur commente notamment les “années de bronze” dans la production de Joe Fafard, dont les célèbres vaches conçues par l'artiste qui, dans le paysage des plaines canadiennes, constituent des points de repère marquants ponctuant l'espace sans fin qui s'étale entre le ciel et l'horizon. Au milieu de la décennie soixante-dix, après quelques années consacrées à l'enseignement, Fafard délaisse le milieu artistique de l'université, qu'il juge trop élitiste, et aménage un atelier de sculpture dans un petit village des Prairies. Cette double expérience du cadre universitaire et de la vie rurale aura une influence déterminante dans l'oeuvre de l'artiste qui, tantôt sculpte des portraits de gens qui lui sont proches (villageois, amis), tantôt de grands maîtres de l'histoire de l'art comme Van Gogh, Picasso, ou Matisse, et tantôt des... vaches, à partir de 1969. Des vaches qui, pour lui, constituent un motif permettant d'aborder et d'expérimenter les problèmes de la sculpture.

Le bronze apparaît au milieu des années quatre-vingt et lui sert à développer d'autres voies qui s'avèrent impossibles en céramique. Qualifié parfois d'artiste régionaliste et populiste, parfois d'humble garçon de ferme qui aurait quitté son patelin en vue de s'instruire et d'acquérir une reconnaissance internationale, pour finalement revenir chez lui en héros national, Fafard est à la fois tout cela et rien de cela. Après la céramique et le bronze, il s'intéresse depuis peu à l'acier découpé pour réaliser ce qu'il nomme des “dessins dans l'espace”. Les oeuvres de Joe Fafard sont exposées au Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, jusqu'au 16 février prochain.