

Kim Morgan *Antsee*

Greg Beatty

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GREG BEATTY

Regina being the home of noted sculptor Joe Fafard, who specializes in life-like renderings of cows and horses in bronze, citizens are used to the idea of public art depicting animals. This spring, our "menagerie" was bolstered with the installation of twenty-three "artist"-decorated fibreglass pigs at various downtown locations. An extension of a fundraiser held the year previous in Saskatoon, the pigs have been greeted with delight by many Reginans, and bemused contempt by most members of the art community.

Sure, it's all in good fun. And the money does go to a worthy cause. But why pigs? In Saskatoon, the project was partially sponsored by a local pork plant. But Regina boasts no such industry. If the initiative — which mimics similar undertakings in places like Toronto, where anatomically-correct moose were unleashed on unsuspecting Hogtowners, and Calgary, where cows were the creature of choice — had to go forward, why not select an animal with a stronger connection to Regina, like the Richardson's ground squirrel (a.k.a. gopher), Canada Goose, or ant?

Oops! Scratch that last suggestion. University of Regina grad student Kim Morgan beat me to the punch with the installation of her sculpture *Antsee* last September. The work, which consists of a dozen larger-than-life-size aluminum ants crawling on a dead tree near *The Cenotaph* (a World War I/II memorial) in Victoria Park, was commissioned by the City of Regina. "The objective of the program is to enhance the public environment, to make it more friendly and interesting," said Glenn Gordon, the City's coordinator of arts, culture and heritage. "We also want to acquire art that has [enduring] significance and demonstrate our support for local artists."

Increasingly, artists are welcoming the opportunity to escape the confines of the gallery and engage with the public on their turf.

"I'm interested in placing art outside the gallery because it enables people to experience art at different levels without it having to be a controlled space, whether it's museum guards or time constraints," said Morgan. "I grew up here. Victoria Park has significance in my memory of what Regina was back then. I think it's a great meeting place. Over the years, it's gone through changes. I wanted to bring more community interaction into the area."

Key to the success of the City's program, said Gordon, is respect for the autonomy of the commissioned artist. Nonetheless, when artists work in the public sphere, they are generally expected to be sensitive to the needs and concerns of various community stakeholders. Because changing demographic and ideological conditions can render an art work problematic, many artists now favour a more nuanced approach to public art-making than the grandiose stone/metal statues and sculptures that used to be common. In 1991, for instance, Metis activists succeeded in having John Nugent's 1967 statue of Louis Riel removed from the Legislative grounds. They argued that Nugent, in contrast to the statesmanlike treatment accorded Euro-Canadian leaders like Sir John A. MacDonald and the Right Honourable John Diefenbaker in other public memorials, had depicted Riel in a disrespectful manner (he was shown gaunt and, except for a cloak, nude, which according to Catherine Matas, who curated the 2001 exhibition *Rielisms*, reflected his "ultimate humiliation at being found without shoes and food [by General Middleton's troops at Batoche in 1885]."

On one level, Morgan's ants, as social insects who live cooperatively in a colony, serve as a metaphor for urban living. Their placement on the tree also reminds viewers how nature recycles dead plant and animal matter to nurture new life. "I was thinking about redevelopment of Regina's core," said Morgan. "We have this habit of tearing everything down. I wanted to take an old structure and inte-

grate something new into it, so they work together." Morgan, who's lived in such cities as Montreal, Toronto and New York, believes Regina is "quite progressive" when it comes to public art. "It actually has a civic arts committee that commissions artists to make site-specific work, and you don't find that everywhere." Still, she does concede that there are limits to what Reginans will tolerate. "There's not a lot of anarchistic, agitating public work in the city."

The flipside of the lack of "controlled space" that Morgan professes to value, of course, is that artists who exhibit in public risk having the integrity of their work infringed upon. The risk is especially high when the art is regarded as unattractive or unduly intrusive. Given the innocuous nature of *Antsee*, one would not have expected it to engender much acrimony. Yet, within days of its installation, one of the ants was stolen. Fortunately, Morgan had a spare ant on hand and could replace it. Then in April, one of the ants was spray-painted blue by a tagger who also left their mark on the concrete border surrounding *The Cenotaph*.

"Any time you put something into the public sphere you run the risk of having people interact with it," says Morgan. "I've put art out there that was ephemeral in the sense that it had a short lifespan material-wise. I wasn't concerned about it being disrupted. This is the first time I've had a permanent installation where people have actually marked it." Originally, Morgan had planned to run ants the length of the tree. But when she was installing the piece passersby joked about the possibility of the ants being stolen, so she decided to follow the City's advice and place them high on the tree.

To reach them, therefore, both the thief and tagger would have required assistance in the form of a ladder (or less likely, an accomplice with sturdy shoulders). In other words, both actions were premeditated.

To protect it's investment and preserve the sanctity of *Antsee*, the City decided in the latter instance to remove the paint. "There's also talk of moving the ants even higher," reported Morgan. "I'm ambivalent about that, because I'm not sure how much I'm willing to go out of my way to procure the piece's safety. For me, that's part of the process." At the same time, she admitted she was disappointed at the thoughtless nature of both "interventions." "I'd like to talk to the people, and find out what their motives were. I suspect there were no political or social motives." What would be encouraging, she said, is if someone were to use her piece as a springboard for an art work or other creative response of their own. "Certainly, I was hoping that some kind of dialogue would take place. But this isn't the attention I was hoping for. What would be interesting is if they started to paint all the ants. Then it could become a contemporary memorial. And that's an interesting concept." ←

KIM MORGAN,
Antsee, 2003.
oPhoto: Courtesy of
the artist.

