

The arts are viewed as a “frill” by many in Alberta. Which isn’t to say we have no culture of our own. But how do we begin to encourage something that makes us so uneasy?

WHO YOU CALLIN’ CULTURED?

BY ARITHA VAN HERK



Wet Trail Ahead, by Theodore Schintz, 1955. Oil on canvas, 20" × 24". Part of the Provincial Art Collection begun in 1954 by Premier Ernest C. Manning, as part of the Golden Jubilee celebration. Now on display at Government House to celebrate Alberta Centennial 2005.

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A COUPLE OF MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS AGO, a would-be alderman knocked on my door suggesting I might wish to vote for him, and asked if I had any concerns about the city of Calgary. I asked him what he planned to do for culture. He looked at me wonderingly, and said, with genuine puzzlement, "What's that?" I had a small fit of temper and snarled at him that transportation and a booming economy are fine but without a serious attitude toward culture and the arts, no city is worth its salt as a place to live in. Neither my assertion nor his own ignorance seemed to give him pause—and I think he went on to win the election. He hasn't been back to my door since.

So what and where is Alberta's culture and arts world today?

The rest of Canada loves repeating the old joke that Alberta culture is an oxymoron. Albertans don't enjoy the teasing, but that isn't enough to make the province identify culture as one of its strengths. In fact, culture is a word that most high- and low-profile Albertans avoid. Dancing, drinking, driving, fine, but culture? That's personal and private, not political or substantive. And it might be subversive, so it's better not to mention it.

This implicit anxiety is most manifest officially, as evidenced by our government and its servants. The word culture appears only once on the Government of Alberta public website, under the Department of Community Development, now headed by the Honourable Gary Mar. That department claims its mandate is to promote community development, protect human rights and promote fairness and access. Its goals are identified as preserving, protecting and representing Alberta's history, culture, provincial parks and protected areas. There it is. A word buried, culture sandwiched between the venerable dead of the past and high-end parking pads for oversized recreational vehicles.

This was not always the case. Between 1946 and 1971, the provincial government actually boasted a Cultural Development Branch, which morphed into the cultural development branch of the Department of Culture, Youth and Recreation (1971-75), then became Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism until Community Development replaced the whole ministry. Apparently, the latter designation is more palatable in relation to the bread and butter of survival and advancement, more acceptable to the fair citizens of this province, than the connotations of frills, icing and extras that "culture" suggests. But this attitude is not so much that of the "average Albertan," but of our provincial politicians. Their deep unease with culture paints it as unmentionable, like a black bra strap peeking out from underneath a respectable sleeve.

Multiculturalism doesn't raise hackles the same way. Painted Ukrainian eggs and Lithuanian dances can be relegated to the arena of ethnic authenticity, which is perfectly clear in origin and intent. And if culture is a matter of food or physical appetite, fine. Everybody likes to eat well. Chinese, Indian, Thai, French, Senegalese. Bring it on!

This anxiety about culture, what it is and what it does, appears to be a part of Alberta's political DNA. As a group, Albertans

don't respond well to the idea that we are cultureless, but following our government's lead, we aren't quite willing to get out there and proudly proclaim our culture. Perhaps we just don't know how to own such a slippery space. Perhaps *savoir vivre* makes us nervous. And so, having been repeatedly subjected to the external definition of the province as boorish, we avoid grasping the thorny stem of Wild Rose cultural sophistication.

Witness the spring 2005 celebration of Alberta culture in Ottawa. Aside from the cruel fact that the National Arts Centre adopts the federally mandated pose of pretending interest in the "regions," what do those federal ringmasters imagine this creature to be? Exactly what might be expected. *Alberta Scene* featured lots of cowboy hats with guitars, country superstars (most of them with home addresses in Nashville), including Terri Clark, Corb Lund and Ian Tyson, solid standbys like Tommy Banks and Oscar Lopez, the Alberta Ballet and the Edmonton Symphony to demonstrate high culture, a soupçon of trendy ethnic faces, and of course the mandatory First Nations theatre and dance. The highlight, a performance of John Murrell's "all-Alberta opera" *Filumena* met with a standing ovation. Ottawa seemed surprised that it was good, although out here we knew that already. In fact, Ottawa seems perpetually surprised that we have a story.

I am not complaining about the artists who were a part of *Alberta Scene*. I admire and respect every one who made the trek down east. But I believe we need to be as suspicious of an Ottawa précis of Alberta culture as we are of the provincial government's fear and loathing of Alberta culture. And the so-called celebration achieved the same old effect. We sat back, handed over the reins of the scene, the stereotype again perpetuated. Once more, we let the centre dictate our story, watched the white hats tip and twang. How many Albertans travelled to Ottawa to support our cultural ambassadors? If some of the events had thin audiences, was that because of a lack of central Canadian interest, or our own hesitation, we Albertans supposedly the original boosters? What was remarkable about *Atlantic Scene* in 2003 was the huge influx of Maritimers determined to show the rest of Canada how well they support their theatre and dance, literature and laughter. By contrast, Alberta didn't hit Ottawa at all. Of course, think about the 100th Birthday Party. The government funded some capital projects (renovations of the Jubilee Auditoria), lots of "community-based" events, but no cultural celebration beyond guitars and cowboy hats—even k.d. lang's subversive take. We were treated to the spectacle of simultaneous fireworks on September 1, while we bought into the very myth that deems us outriders in the arena of the arts.

Perhaps the term culture itself is too lofty and idealistic. Are we nervous about concepts too elevated for our wheels-on-the-ground, gravel-road-dust characters? Community is easy to embrace, but culture? Even if, anthropologically speaking, culture umbrellas the agglomeration of traits, systems, patterns and values that a people lives by, there's something daunting about the word's emanation. Culture is something we'll wave away to London and New York. Culture is an aura that happens in translation, at least an airplane ride away, behind an edifice like the Louvre or the National Gallery. And yet, we grimace at the oft-repeated "there's more culture in yogurt than

in Edmonton.” And we’re well aware that creativity serves as a powerful marker of contemporary life. The cities that are our homes are Petri dishes of our preoccupations, not only what we eat and drink, ginger fried beef and bloody Caesars (both Alberta inventions), but how we perform identity. Distinctive to our occupation of these spaces, rural and urban, are rituals and gestures so certainly distinctive to our tone and ambiance that they mark us as certainly as a scar or a tattoo individualizes a body. The lift of voice in a Westerner saying hello. The courtesy of offering the appliance repairman a cup of coffee. The giddy exhilaration that greets the first snowy day of the year. Mufflers and gloves, block heater cords and the throb of long, long light in July. The turn of a hand, the shape of an argument. These mark a place like no other.

But within that body, that occupation of this space, where do we locate culture’s escort, the arts—high and low, fine and frothy? Perhaps Albertans refuse to point to culture’s bedrock consuetude because we then might have to admit we are a loose cooperative whose culture is contingent, fluid, not easily defined or contained, neither drillable nor describable, even if we celebrate Stampedes and flock to festivals and support piano competitions. The thorny question persists, of whether we are a philistine and doggedly parochial bunch who prefer obituaries to opera, hockey to harmony, billiards and bacon to ballet?

This some-assembly-required Alberta remains conveniently ignorant of how our history, our economics and our landscape

have carved into our collective consciousness a geological trace. The astonishingly beautiful scenery in Alberta, from the boreal forest to the bald prairie, from the Rockies to the parkland, propose one aspect of that character. Always inundated with the eye candy of a spectacular landscape, offered mountains, river valleys and a diversity of hills and plains, Albertans have developed a mineral insouciance. Beauty is available beyond every window, down every road, and thus culture is not our focus. The great cities of the world, while they have grown along the highways of rivers or on the shores of water, had to compensate for the ugliness of their littoral locations. The swamp of Berlin, the smog and humidity of Toronto, the outwash turgidity of London, all are doggedly unscenic, and so the arts became compensations for the citizens living there.

The second aspect is Alberta’s wealth, its petrological legacy. The crushed trilobites and brachiopods which bequeathed this province the accident of huge reserves of oil and gas have soaked Alberta in a stubborn sense of culture not as an aspect of human expression to be sought after, but as a physical given, an accessory easily acquired. Our wealth sloshes under our feet, and all Albertans have to do is drill in the right places, hit it lucky. But this geological determinism does not work well with the more plastic and performative aspects of culture that demand nourishing—the arts. A confident place does not merely offer opportunities to consume culture, but promotes and incites and encourages artists to create culture.



Strung, by Gordon Ferguson. Steel, 13.5' × 38" diameter at the large end, and actual barbed wire scale at the small end.

PHOTO BY RIC KOKOTOVICH

The economy that accommodates creativity passively will never achieve the same distinction as the economy that enables and encourages creativity. It takes years of investment, time, money and steady work to build companies like One Yellow Rabbit or the Edmonton Symphony. Such proud accomplishments do not arise full-blown from some forehead, without the fertilizer of support. And so Alberta culture is in some way stratigraphically imbricated, crippled by our geological profligacy. We can buy anything, and so we don't think about growing it ourselves. There's beauty all around, so painters ought to be painting it, and if they do, we'll buy those paintings. But what about the patron that enables the painter to paint through an apprenticeship? Albertans have never been fond of seeds that must be coaxed to germinate. We favour the inspiration-on-a-rocket, overnight-success, strike-it-rich, blast-to-the-top, blow-out model.

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SUCH ATTITUDES can only fuel accusations that we are a gulag, intent on exploiting the earth, imprisoned in our own labyrinth of gas and oil refineries. Now, at age one hundred, it is time we asked ourselves the hard questions. Are we an oil-gorged troll? Does the innate puritanism of our economic fealty make this province a bad bet for culture and the arts? Does it give rise to corporately endorsed culture—frequently very safe? Are we, for all our bluster, afraid of taking risks, no high-wire artists, no rule-breakers? Is our culture confined and corseted, courteous and clothed and, worst of all, toothless? Should we lament the culture that we think we do not have, or should we celebrate the culture that vibrates around us? Is Alberta's culture informed by our ethnocultural diversity, or does it focus on the agricultural paradigm that the story claims as our destiny? Fancy work, baking, sewing and dancing have industrious antecedents. Do we fear subversive culture as we feared historically the foreigners who flooded into Alberta and so changed her character?

Differentiations between high and low culture contribute to that old argument. We can endorse Gertrude Himmelfarb, who blitzes our current culture of relativism by claiming that the tastes of ordinary people are incapable of apprehending any measure of greatness; or we can agree with Richard Florida, who argues that culture starts in garages and back rooms, on the street and in casual conversation. If we are inclined to suspect that culture should be lofty and transcendent, then we may consider Alberta to be beyond hope, the arts here mere simulacra of what happens elsewhere. If we are willing to sniff sage and listen to a folk festival squeezebox and read the quick scene descriptors in free weekly entertainment papers, then we may not feel at all deprived. As an index of the material circumstances of the people who occupy a certain place at a certain time, culture records us as we register it. But these material conditions beg concrete questions. Can the rig worker write poetry? Can the Wal-Mart greeter paint canvases? Can the hairdresser sing in a chorus? Yes, but in this Alberta, will such cultural "participation" happen, or will it be considered always subsidiary to hockey and scrapbooking?

ALBERTA WILL KEEP its eyes on the decorous, decorative mountains and the lakes and flowers bounded by the province's fenceline of officially sanctioned art as harmless diversion for earnest citizens.

Henry Kriesel's short story "The Travelling Nude," first published in 1959, outlines this dilemma of Alberta's relationship to culture. In the story, a would-be painter, Herman O. Mahler, an Albertan but a graduate of the respectable Ontario College of Art, who has managed to sell only \$200 worth of work in five years, is forced to take a job as an extension lecturer in art for the University of Alberta. Overjoyed, he imagines the "rough diamonds" he will unearth, the hidden talent he will discover in the small towns and communities of Alberta, where he travels to teach "the noble art of painting." Disappointed that his students are more interested in painting mountains and scenery than in freeing themselves from the bondage of representation, he conceives of a plan to shift his amateur artistes in the direction of "the perfect freedom of Abstraction." His plan is to present his students with a real model, a female nude, and thus persuade them to abandon their fixation on "mountains and lakes and flowers." Mahler's determination to provide every small community class with a travelling nude does not come to fruition, mostly because of Alberta's reticence about the travelling nude stepping off the bus and onto their doorsteps. But the story is instructive, a hilarious critique of the early and repeated efforts of Alberta Culture to "introduce culture to the land." No matter how you conduct art classes in gymnasiums and community halls, no matter what the incentive to shift the gaze beyond the landscape, art in Alberta resists the troubling apparition of a travelling nude, and so will forever keep its eyes trained on the decorous and decorative mountains and the lakes and the flowers bounded by the province's fenceline of officially sanctioned art and what it is supposed to do (provide a little harmless diversion for earnest citizens) and what it is supposed to mean (beauty without inconvenience, distress, rudeness or nausea).

The truth of Kriesel's story lives on. Culture in Alberta, the pundits declare, had better not make any trouble, better not demand any money, better not raise too many eyebrows. No matter how wealthy and sophisticated we pretend to be, the province hasn't the maturity to deal with a disturbing or troublesome reflection of its own restless soul. But that external evaluation is called into question by the rasping friction, the unpretty explorations of Ronnie Burkett and Brad Fraser, of Chris Cran and Joane Cardinal-Schubert.

And so our artists are forced to enact a double bind, activism in disguise, irony bitten deep and to our very cuticles. We're hoist between the dominant pragmatism that came out of Alberta's agrarian character and a puritanism that knows culture is about loafing, drinking, staying up late, laughter, pleasure, a vicarious enjoyment that ought to be treated with

ALBERTA'S AGRARIAN character and puritanism knows culture is about loafing, drinking, staying up late, laughter, pleasure and a vicarious enjoyment that ought to be treated with suspicion.

suspicion. We live here, we artists, despite this eye-on-the-stock-exchange atmosphere, determined to make art. We nudge Alberta with sarcasm and laughter and tough critique, even if Alberta turns a conveniently deaf ear. For example, for the Calgary Philharmonic's 1992 Pipeline Tour, Allan Bell's "An Elemental Lyric" featured 400 pounds of gas pipe being played by the CPO's principal percussionist, Tim Rawlings. The commentary at work, the pipe resounding as an echo of Alberta's primary industry, is undeniable. In the recent McIntyre Ranch Project Exhibition at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, artist Gordon Ferguson created an overwhelmingly physical installation of gargantuan barbed wire, an ironic play on the fencing of Alberta's wide grasslands. In a curiously perspective-based piece, the barbed wire threads from an impossibly giant rendition smaller and smaller through to regular-sized barbed wire. Astonishingly visceral, the "sculpture" is both celebratory and critical at the same time, art internalizing practicality, and cheekily reminding us that all working and useful materials can also speak to what is beautiful. The same is true with *Filumena*, John Murrell's opera based on the life of Filumena (or Florence) Losandro, the Italian immigrant girl who took up with rum runner Emilio Picariello and, found guilty of shooting an Alberta Provincial Policeman, swung at the end of justice's rope, the last woman to be hanged in Alberta. The enthusiastic response to this opera sidesteps the extent to which Losandro and Picariello suffered the ill-disguised racism of those who felt that "Dago," or Italian, immigrants were less desirable Albertans than Anglo-Saxons. Various critics have excoriated this portrait of Italian Albertans as bootleggers and criminals when so many Italians are exemplary citizens. And that uneasy essentialism raises another question. How much does art reveal about our dark side, our intolerance, our oblique cruelty, our dismissive ignorance of those in trouble and marginalized?

Culture in Alberta is thus forced to recite a persistent double entendre, bitterness flavoured with laughter. Give Albertans their oil pipes and barbed wire and hanging deaths—and make them love it. If they want to see a reflection of themselves, then so be it. Do not analyze what kind of culture grows in a province shaped by ranch hands, immigrants, miners, risk-takers, investors and economic migrants who come here with an eye on the main chance, a desire for land, an urge for wealth. In such a field, artists have to believe that even if art and culture face a truculent standoff here, it is impossible—in this exuberant, wildly innovative and yet stoically conformist, creative and yet suspicious province—to stop culture in its tracks, no matter how Alberta's politicians would like to keep culture harnessed to the engine of economics.

Albertans might see culture as purchasable patina and experience, but the packaging and selling of our blinkered focus on work and money will bite us in the ass. Originals, we resist originality. Our vicarious thirst for exotic experience challenges our self-satisfaction, and yet we groom complacency. If our work ethic prevents us from celebrating culture, then how can we embrace the innovation and risk-taking that we claim as our brand? Our Protestant reticence, our endorsement of work and self-sufficiency, are at odds with the physical beauty that surrounds us. Our leisure time may be reliant on useful pleasures, but even the dourest of deficit slayers must occasionally laugh. Although we might not want to admit it, all of our tolerances and intolerances, creativities and bigotries, are played out here, on this frontier.

Alberta's culture, then, is torqued by our love of cars and driving, rippled by ice and railways and rivers. Alberta's culture includes barbecued buffalo, ski poles, chuckwagon horses, dance bands and hay bales, golf and fishing. Alberta's culture is as much reflected by a solemn family of Korean Calgarians perched on a line of hay bales and eating Stampede breakfast pancakes in a mall parking lot as it is a three-octave soprano singing Filumena's last words. Alberta's culture used to include scrub at recess and curling at midnight and wheelbarrow races at high noon. It is celebrated by a harmonica and a double bass and heaters on outdoor patios as much as by Mozart played by a symphony in the shadow of the mountains. Our culture may be more familiar with raspberry canes than foie gras, may be more compelled by dinosaurs than medieval armour, more preoccupied with beer than châteauneuf du pape, more focused on the bulletin board at the supermarket than the *New Yorker*. It may seem quotidian, reductive and even embarrassing in its rather raw utility, but it is a culture.

Culture is not a star twinkling in the heavens above, but part of how we live. It is not distant and isolated, but located in the way we walk, the gesture of hands holding a cup of coffee, the particular huddle of a teenager's shoulders against an early November wind. The smell of incoming snow in the piney valley of the North Saskatchewan is a perfume so distinctive that it could not exist anywhere else.

We must take possession of its power. We must act, declare the weight and value of the arts here, and begin to clear more space for them, make culture a primary matter, essential. We cannot wait for government to shape a policy on behalf of the province. Those jurisdictions and their motivations are too abstract, too self-interested. We citizens have to engage concretely with this culture that is ours to enjoy, ours to protect, ours to celebrate. Like me, you might be mad as hell, but adamant that you aren't leaving this lucky, beautiful, disgracefully uncultured and yet creative place. And if you intend to stay, to forge a future, it might be time to do more than talk about the shadow arts, fenceline culture and Alberta's aesthetic ornament.

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