

VISUAL ART

Schouten in the Landscape

by Alison Gillmor

For the Band of "Saulteaux, in the Beren's River" region, now settled or who may with in two years settle therein, a reserve commencing at the outlet of Beren's River into Lake Winnipeg, and extending along the shores of said lake, and up said river and into the interior behind each said lake and river, so as to comprehend one hundred and sixty acres for each family of five, a reasonable addition being, however, to be made by Her Majesty to the extent of the said reserve for the inclusion in the tract so reserved of swamp, but reserving the free navigation of the said lake and river, and free access to the shores and waters thereof, for Her Majesty and all Her subjects, and excepting thereout such land as may have been granted to or stipulated to be held by the "Hudson Bay Company," and also such land as Her Majesty or Her successors, may in Her good pleasure, see fit to grant to the Mission established at or near Beren's River by the Methodist Church of Canada, for a church, school-house, parsonage, burial ground and farm, or other mission purposes....

Excerpt from Treaty 5, between Her Majesty the Queen and the Saulteaux and Swampy Cree Tribes, 1875.

"Treaty Lands" by Winnipeg painter Tim Schouten is a radiant and rich alternative to the arid limitations of legality. The copies of treaties 1, 2 and 5 which are available at the entrance to the exhibition demonstrate an attempt to rationalize land—to measure, divide and section it along lines of latitude and longitude, to contain and control it through the meticulous hair-splitting of official language. Land has become an abstraction. Schouten's combinations of photographs and paintings offer a concrete response. Here land is emotionally evocative, steeped in layers of contradictory meanings that resist rationalization, bound up with the scrubby, clapboard banalities of everyday life.

Schouten exhibits first a very small black and white photo of a stretch of field or forest or river implicated in one of the treaties. The subject matter often has a deliberate homeliness—forsaken houses on dirt roads, fallow fields, the weedy, stony brush near railroad tracks, unexceptional views of woods and water. Beside each photograph is a painting, usually near enough to the photo in its broad outlines to be recognizable, but also completely transformed by the colour, texture and emphatic physicality of Schouten's paint. Seemingly anonymous tracts of land suddenly become vivid and unforgettable.

The composition is unusual. Conventional landscape painting prescribes a sky-to-earth ratio that runs somewhere between 1:1 to 1:2, a civilized sort of 18th-century balance of air and matter, the divine and the human. Schouten's works are tied heavily to the ground, which often looms almost all the way up the canvas, leaving only a shy strip of sky at the top—sometimes taking up as little as one-twelfth of the picture. There is something inescapable about this viewpoint. We don't hover above the ground with a god-like, all-encompassing vista; the land leans massively towards us, threatening (or maybe promising) to take us in.

The earth itself has a matter-of-factness about it. Schouten adds straw, sand and autobody fill to his paint to make the land seem thick, dark, clodded, stubborn. At the same time he contradicts this rather literal representation of earth with

extraordinary colour. There are fields of iridescent orange, or black shot through with gold and mauve. Water is a blue that borders on a bottomless black. A graveyard, filled rather poignantly with small, painted wooden crosses leaning towards each other like tired old friends, is built up of improbably brilliant and dark reds and greens. One sky is painted the flat gold of a mediaeval icon.

Schouten's last show, "More Ram!" at Gallery 1003, took the personal computer and gave it an incongruous treatment—a layered, dripping, painterly approach that bordered on Abstract Expressionism. He suggested not the hard-edged, technological parameters of the PC but its unpredictable poetic possibilities, both as a physical object and as a transforming force in our culture. In this exhibition, Schouten uses his art in a similar way. He affirms that land is more than a legal matter of titles and deeds and property through his own parallel action—by showing us that painting is more than

straight-ahead representation, more than factual description. Schouten's paint-handling suggests physicality and palpability, as well as the more elusive auras of memory and feeling. Likewise, the land in his paintings is marked not by surveyors' instruments, but by the weight of time, by the connections of families, by the colour of blood. ♦

"Treaty Lands: An Exhibition of Paintings by Tim Schouten," February 3 to 28, 1998, <SITE> Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Alison Gillmor contributes frequently to *Border Crossings* on visual art.