

# Questions & Artists: Frontier myth-making

**Leah Sandals, National Post** Published: Wednesday, August 06, 2008

*Paris's Left Bank, New York's East Village and now ... Calgary's sprawling suburbs? Artistic enclaves might be the last thing people associate with oil-rich Cowtown, but artist/curator Wil Murray says Calgary has a youthful painting scene worth watching. And as of last month, he's got the group exhibition (at the city's Glenbow Museum, no less) to prove it. Here, Murray tells Leah Sandals why Calgary painters lasso his praise - no bronco-busting required.*

**Q** How did this show on young Calgary painters come about?

**A** This year, for the first time, the Sled Island Music Festival did a visual arts component. I knew some of the fest organizers, and I had been thinking about doing a show of these artists in Calgary for a while.

I was born and raised in Calgary, and went to art college here. I left eight years ago to Vancouver and then Montreal, but I kept looking over my shoulder to what a lot of Calgary artists were doing. There's a commonality we seem to have. One epiphany was seeing a piece of Dave and Jenn's [a first-name-only artist duo] that I could pick out from across the room as being very much from Calgary. It piqued my curiosity and I started thinking, "Maybe there's a really good show possible among these people."

**Q** What could this "Calgary school" of painting be defined by?

**A** Definitely there's a colour commonality; several of the artists use very bright colours. And a lot of these artists talk about their paintings more as objects than images. Chris Millar has the pieces that come off his paintings, for instance, and Miriam Bankey's canvases hang off their supports.

**Q** Why do you think these common themes emerge? They don't have much to do with, say, er, the Flames.

**A** In Calgary, you're removed from a lot of the artifacts of art history. You can access them in photographs, but a lot of artists here have built their paintings up in opposition to the flatness of a page of photographs. I think this alienated relationship to art history has built to something really interesting.

**Q** Couldn't prominent local teachers have an influence? Eric Cameron is big on painting as object, and Chris Cran on eye-popping colour.

**A** Definitely. Eric Cameron is a huge on excess of material, and Chris Cran works across pop and formalism. The humour in John Will's paintings and the emphasis on materials for Richard Halliday and Don Kottman are also a big influences.

**Q** You've written about the idea that Calgary, as a wealthy city, is hostile to artists. Why?

**A** The idea of that hostility has been an important invention. I read it in newspapers and hear it from lots of people - that Calgary is a difficult place to be an artist. And there's a very clear exodus of artists from Calgary at a certain age.

Still, this city does develop good artists and good art. I think this exhibition shows that. And I don't really know what city is supposed to be good for encouraging artists. I live in Montreal, which is counted as a good city to be an artist in. But what makes it good can also be prohibitive - you're walking into a really established community. In contrast, Calgary is still the wild west in many ways; it's in development. You can do a ton. There's an untested quality, and I think that's part of the appeal for artists that do come and stay here.

**Q** Yet half the artists in this show - and you - have left Calgary. Why?

**A** I think a lot of artists leave because it's a boomtown, and being an artist is not immediately rewarding in a monetary sense. You can work at KFC for \$15 an hour here, so it seems even more bizarre to slave away in a studio and not make any money for a while.

**Q** What are your Calgary must-dos?

**A** Well, last night I wound up sitting in the Ship and Anchor drinking beer. I also went back to the Alberta College of Art and Design; I love wandering the studios.

**Q** What about the Stampede factor? It's not in the paintings, but it must show up -somewhere.

**A** Well, if local curator Wayne Baerwaldt is hanging out, he'll be in a western shirt and Wranglers because he dresses like a cowboy. In Montreal, there's also a yearly Stampede Pancake Breakfast for ex-Calgarians, which I go to. There can definitely be nostalgia with distance.

- **Painting: Thick & Thin** continues at the Glenbow Museum until Sept. 28. Visit [glenbow.org](http://glenbow.org) for more information.