

# Unknown soldiers

Questions & Artists: Last year, artist Graeme Patterson turned one stranger a week into a ?gurine. The replicas of everyone he didn't recognize are now on display in Calgary

**Leah Sandals,**

Published: Friday, January 09, 2009



Do you recognize yourself among the art-world eccentrics? This puppet-class photo features characters Graeme Patterson met in 2008.

Though it employs millions of people, and entertains millions more, worldwide, the art world is often thought of as a small place. And as Canadian artist Graeme Patterson shows, it can certainly be miniaturized. In his new exhibition, *The Puppet Collective*, which just opened at Trepanier Baer Gallery in Calgary, Patterson unveils tiny replicas of some colourful characters he's encountered during his art-world travels. What's more, any willing buyers of his art will soon be miniaturized, too. Here, Patterson talks about the grander vision behind his pint-sized figurines.

**Q** *In the past, you've created miniature versions of your Halifax art school and your grandparents' Saskatchewan hometown. Why is making miniatures so appealing?*

**A** I guess I've always been into miniatures. As a kid I collected a lot of action figures. It was a big part of my world. The funny thing, though, is that all the action figures I collected when I was a kid eventually disappeared in garage sales. So now whenever I see one in Value Village, I buy it. I have a lot of WWF wrestlers, the big rubber bendy ones.

**Q** *The miniatures you've created for this current show - who are they based on?*

**A** My past projects were based on people and places I know really well. But over the past few years of travelling a lot, I've been taking notes on people I don't know. At the

beginning of last year I decided to make one puppet a week based on a stranger who resonated in my mind - maybe it was what they were wearing, or some other visible part of their personality. So now I have 52 puppets of random people.

*Q You do have a great variety - from punk rockers to senior citizens. But what makes these puppets rather than just small sculptures?*

**A** Well, I also make animated films, so these are stop-motion puppets, fully posable in everything but their facial expression. They're about six to eight inches tall, about a one-to-10 scale. So buyers can pose them if they want. I haven't used these for films, because they get pretty worn down if you do that, but I have been taking "class photo" pictures of them.

*Q Speaking of buyers, you're requiring everyone who buys a puppet to submit a photo of themselves so you can make a miniature sculpture of them. Why's that?*

**A** The more I travel to art fairs, the more I find collectors themselves are interesting characters. Also, this is my first show in a commercial art gallery, and I wanted the project to make sense with the venue. So I tried to put collectors into the project a little more. Rather than just buying a work, they become part of the project. In a way, trying to collect a collector became interesting to me.

*Q Do you think collectors are overlooked in terms of their public influence on, say, what museums show*

*or acquire?*

**A** Not really. I think their names are known. But their image often isn't. I don't know how collectors will react to all this, but I've talked to a few that are quite excited about it.

*Q Why did you title this as a "collective" rather than a "collection" then?*

**A** In a way, from this point on, it's more other people's buying decisions than my creative decisions that will determine what puppets I make. If someone keeps buying the same puppet, I will have to keep replacing that puppet with a reproduction of them. So it will eventually be more a community portrait rather than just a collection of puppets - especially if I keep doing "class photos" every year. One day, I'd like to use all the photographs of buyers and sculptures to make a catalogue of who bought who and who's

connected to who - almost a Facebook-type thing.

**Q** *Interesting. What's next for you?*

**A** Right now, I'm experimenting with animations, trying to work my own body into them - trying to put myself in with puppets in their scale. And I've got ideas for a big project on my first best friend. He moved to Japan when we were little kids and I don't know where he is. Part of the project is actually finding him in live-action documentary film and the other half is recreating my memories of him through robotics.

• *Graeme Patterson: The Puppet Collective runs till Feb. 7 at Calgary's Trepanier Baer Gallery. For details, visit [trepanierbaer.com](http://trepanierbaer.com).*