National spotlight shines on city artist

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Lethbridge Herald
Thursday, November 5, 2009

He's based in Lethbridge, but David Hoffos is emerging as one of Canada's most exciting multi-media artists. Now the National Gallery of Canada is showcasing his work, starting with an opening-night gala today in Ottawa. "Scenes from the House Dream," a series of dioramas created here over a five-year span, debuted in Lethbridge a year ago. Now Hoffos becomes the first Lethbridge artist to gain a National Gallery showing — through Feb. 14 — before he moves the show to Toronto and Halifax.

His video, audio and mixed media installation "Scenes" offers scenarios from everyday life in miniature. They spring to life through the appearance of real people in dream-like imagery that appears to be holographic.

Viewed in the dark, dream scenes observed through small windows include outdoor, indoor, city and country scenes. Real people are moving inside through the magic of technique developed by Hoffos after a vivid dream.

"I had been working with miniature models for two or three years and I just started to see them as kind of empty places," he said when the show opened in Lethbridge. "They needed some sort of human interaction in them. And so that became a problem. I needed to have figures inside, I needed movement inside these models and that became a very specific dream that I had."

That dream grew into a series of works now placed in the Ottawa gallery's exhibition area for contemporary art. Jonathan Shaughnessy, assistant curator of contemporary art, says Hoffos began winning national attention when he became the Prairies' nominee for the national Sobey Art Award in 2002.

"David Hoffos has been in the public eye nationally for most of the past decade," he says. Shaughnessy has seen Hoffos' work and studio during visits to Lethbridge, he adds. "This is a huge body of work," he says, describing "Scenes" when he saw the show filling both the upper and lower

galleries at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery. “To me, it needs to be seen in a national way.”Hoffos went to Ottawa to unpack and install the show, with Shaughnessy lending assistance. "It’s really quite magical the way you can see him bringing all that complexity together,” he says.

The National Gallery has shown other artists who’ve lived in Lethbridge, he said, including Janet Cardiff — who later moved to New York. But Hoffos is the first who’s grown his reputation and built his career in Lethbridge. “David’s work is spread all over the country,” the curator says. “But he’s committed to Lethbridge and Alberta.”

While most artists live in or near major markets, Shaughnessy says visitors are delighted to find a “surprisingly active” arts scene in southern Alberta. Not only is there a large faculty of fine arts, but there are artists, musicians and performers who base their careers in Lethbridge. “David is part of quite a vibrant community.”