

# Richard Purdy's Fantastical Realities

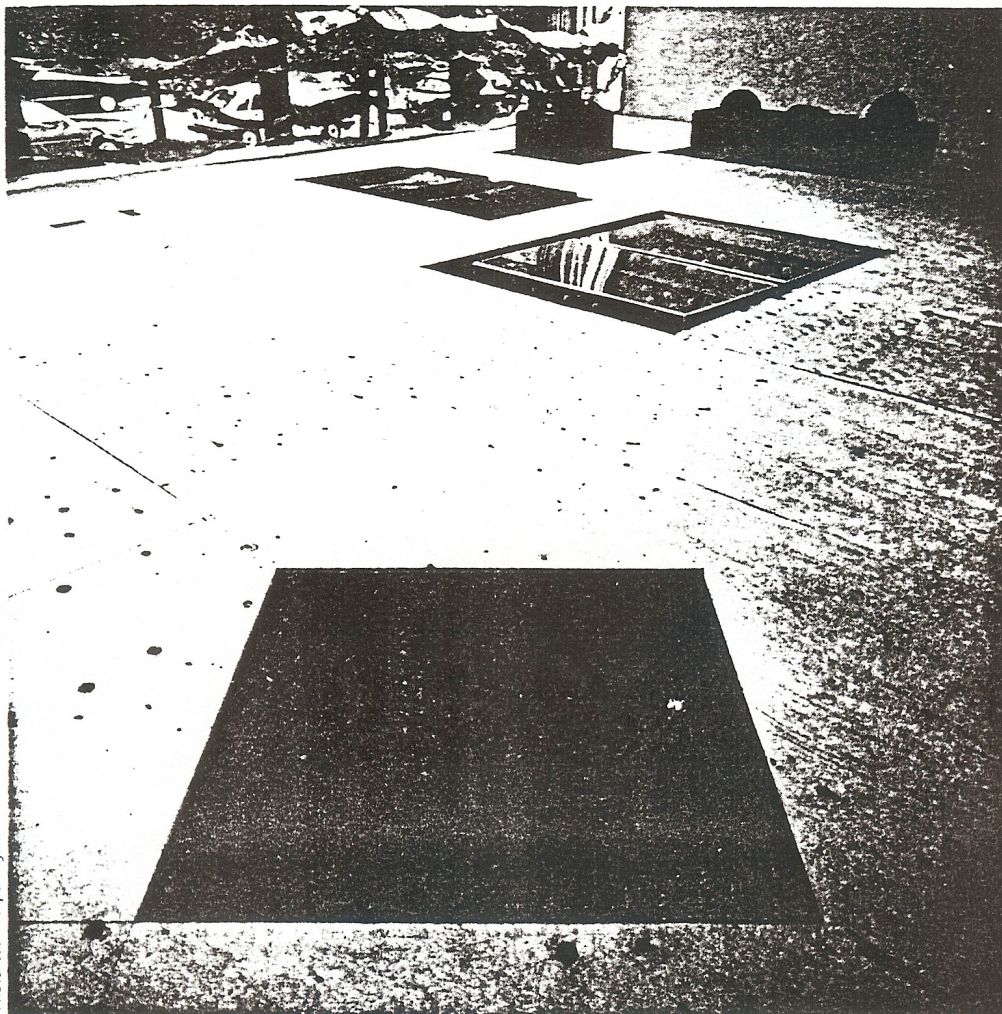


Photo: Juan Felipe Arquez

By Peter O'Brien

La responsabilité  
d'un artiste n'est pas  
d'informer ou d'expliquer,  
mais de ranimer en nous  
une monde  
que nous connaissons  
depuis toujours  
sans l'avoir habité.

Richard Purdy<sup>1</sup>

And this is an art known as Painting, which requires both imagination and work of the hand, because the painter has to invent things that are not to be seen, representing them under the guise of natural ones, and to shape them with his hand, making what does not exist appear to exist ... the painter is given liberty to compose a figure, standing or sitting, or half man and half horse, as he pleases, according to his imagination.

Cennino Cennini, pupil of Giotto<sup>2</sup>

We all imagine ourselves into existence. History — past, present and future, if we can pretend for a moment that there is a difference among the three — is fabricated from varying measures of speculation, fact and misinterpretation. For the past fifteen years Montreal artist Richard Purdy has been exploring and exploding this slippery world, a world where fact masquerades as fiction and fiction masquerades as fact. He has taken the world that we take for granted and turned it into a multitude of creations, each with its own integrity and set of protocols. Inundated by information and explication, we are often forced into seeing our lives in a specific way. Purdy gives us a set of chimerical worlds that resound somewhere deep within us, that seem familiar, even though we have never inhabited them. He has given us a politics of subversion that is founded in the imagination and draws upon biology, theology, geography and anthropology, among other disciplines.

The most recent incarnation of Purdy's work is a retrospective of ten projects. The show, "The Poisoning of Reality," was recently at Montreal's Saidye Bronfman Centre, with future stops scheduled for the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver and the London Regional Art Gallery. Walking into the show the viewer notices ... well, nothing — or almost nothing. The walls are bare and, from a dis-

tance, there are very few things on the floor. A false floor was built by Purdy, sixteen inches above the original floor, and the works were then inserted in holes cut into the false floor. "The spectator will step up on a low platform, and realise that the entire floor of the Bronfman Centre has been elevated, and the work is installed in the floor. This slight elevation puts the viewer off balance, out of contact with the floor ... We are now prepared for the aerial view. Holes are cut into the floor, like a swiss cheese, arranged in a rigorous geometric pattern. Different projects are grouped with a distinctive hole shape. The whole floor creaks and resonates with the visitor's footsteps. It looks like a graveyard full of holes — filled with old projects."<sup>3</sup>

One of the first projects the viewer sees is *The Lost Civilization of Ba Pe* (1978-80). The civilisation is represented by artifacts, models, dance, musical instruments, even a Ba Pe cookbook. One of Purdy's first projects, Ba Pe turns the "science" of archaeology on itself, tracing with rigour and precision the reconstruction of a civilisation. Purdy constructs vitrines for artifacts of a displaced religious sect of radical Hindus that was entombed by volcanic ash in 79 AD. The history, wonder and speculation — hallmarks of archaeological research — are here along with intact artifacts! Doesn't every archaeologist dream of costumes intact, pottery unbroken? Purdy provides archaeology with a model of its own aspirations.

In another early project, *NAO, the Crawling Villages of Brazil* (1983), Purdy takes up the anthropological experiment, inverting the apparently standard idealisation of the Other. In this exhibition, a selection of models, paintings and doctored photographs from NAO were displayed. The culture invented is distinguished by its total lack of hygiene. In the exhibition guide (copies of which were freely available on site) it is stated that: a typical NAO

Previous page:  
Richard Purdy  
Installation view  
Mixed media, lifesize

Right:  
*Progeria  
Longaevus*  
(1988-89)  
Mixed media on hand-  
made paper, 1' x 365'



house becomes so dirty and infested after six months that the family can no longer tolerate living in it. Rather than move they build an extension on the house, sealing up the old dwelling. Thus every six months an extension is built on the house, causing it to slowly crawl through the forest. The house of a son branches off of his father's ... This leads to the curious situation that the structure of the NAO village traces the inhabitants tortured genealogies.<sup>4</sup>

"Anthropology," says Foucault, "is disintegrating before our eyes, since we are beginning to recognise and denounce in it, in a critical mode, both a forgetfulness of the opening that made it possible and a stubborn obstacle standing obstinately in the way of an imminent new form of thought."<sup>5</sup> Purdy has taken this notion of the disintegration of anthropology to its (il)logical extreme. The NAO culture turns inside-out all the standard anthropological studies and throws us back onto our own individual anthropologies, our own new forms of thought.

In *Eschatology*, a project Purdy worked on in 1980-81, fictive speculations have been superseded by devastating reality. *Eschatology* is a branch of theology concerned with the final events in the history of the world. In Purdy's project a pandemic of "Labrador fever" strikes North America in 1962, killing one third of the population. For the current show a large rectangular piece was cut out of the floor. An unmade bed is strewn with newspaper reports detailing various aspects of this terrible disaster, its effect on money markets, politics, the medical establishment and the average person. Viewers are invited to lie in the bed to watch a video in which Purdy documents the horror and sickness ravaging the planet. Purdy's "historical fantasy" predates our awareness of the international AIDS crisis; and in watching the video and reading the newspaper reports, one becomes curiously uncomfortable: Purdy's fiction has become too real. As T.S. Eliot

said, "human kind / Cannot bear very much reality."<sup>6</sup> *Eschatology* manages to simultaneously speculate on the past, record the future and play havoc with the present.

The heart of the installation is *Corpus Christi* (1983-84), a model of a city in the form of Christ on the cross. The exhibition guide tells us that the city was designed by Fra Lucio Palaccio, architect of Pope Leo X, from 1504 to 1510. In the published journal about this work Purdy writes:

The city is entered through the traditional four gates, the roads leading to them called *strade del sangue*. These roads symbolise the rivers of blood which flowed from Christ's wounds — the feet, hands and side.<sup>7</sup>

Each of the city's amenities is spotted at the anatomically appropriate place: the market is in the stomach; the wine merchants are in the liver; the abdomen is served by a winding road, the *corso intestino*; the banks, which provide articulation for the city, are in the knees; the prisons are in the feet; the government buildings are in the head, "to encourage intelligence among our civic leaders," writes Palaccio.<sup>8</sup> At the centre — the heart of the city — is the most important building, the cathedral:

*As the blood of man passes always through his heart, where it is purified for the benefit of his body, so all the citizens of my city will pass on every task past the cathedral, to be sanctified. So I have arranged the streets, that they lead ever to the great church. And who, in passing, could not enter it, if even for a moment, to do penance to the Holy Virgin? So the streets, like the veins of man, bring him back to the source of spiritual life.<sup>9</sup>*

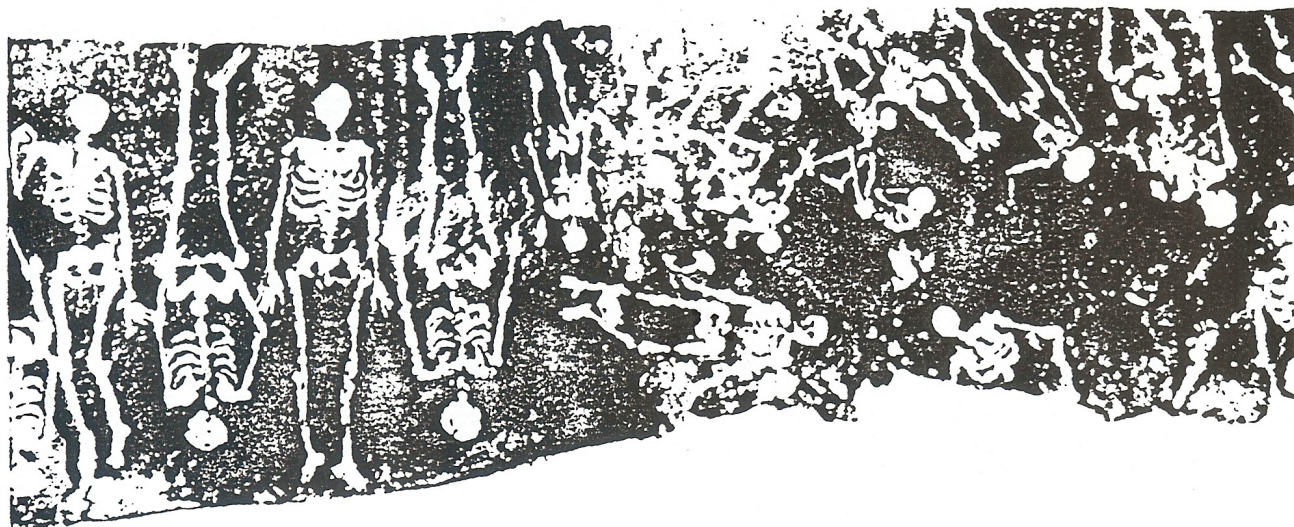


Photo: Juan Felipe Argaez



Detail, *Progeria Longaevus*  
(1988-89)

Mixed media on hand-made paper, 1' x 365'

*Corpus Christi* turns the notion of the body politic on its head, as bodily and societal functions become one. Painstakingly documented with maps, working drawings and art historical references, the city is the natural culmination of speculations by Leonardo, Filarete and others. Purdy simultaneously resists the constraints of history and relishes them. He creates for himself a whole new world of fact and documentation, as though doomed to repeat the mistakes and misrepresentations of the past at the same time as he enjoys them.

In *FURIAE; The History of Culture X* (1987), through models, photographs, pseudo-medical documents, et cetera, Purdy traces the psychiatric fantasy of a man named Richard Freeman. Over a ten-year period Freeman elaborates his delusions about the history, religion, language and rituals of Culture X. The society develops a dramatic split between the sexes, resulting in homosexuality among the men, while women adopt a "ritualistic practice wherein mothers took their sons as lovers. The first sperm shed by a woman's son was to be with her."<sup>10</sup> Admitted to the Montreal Institute of Behavioural Psychology, Freeman is treated by Dr. Ruth Evelyn, who attempts to bring him back to reality by working through the fantasy. Freeman moves in and out of trances, all of which are recorded in "The Trance Records":

*The future is at my back; since I cannot see it, it must be behind me ... As you know, all reproduction was asexual. Only the female existed, and she reproduced successfully carrying the genes. Your science believes that males were invented to add to the gene pool. Such a notion is evidently false; natural factors produce enough variety for any species to survive. Why then did we invent males?*<sup>11</sup>

While under Dr. Evelyn's treatment, Freeman's psychosis results in his pseudocyesis (phantom pregnancy) and eventual death at the Institute. Sexuality, psychiatry, delusion — this work is obsessed with the politics and vagaries of identity. In her essay for the Power Plant's "Enchantment/Disturbance" show Renee Baert states, "Cultural memory is inextricable from the question of identity. And identity is obtained through will and desire as they press against the grid of the possible, with its nodal points of resistance and concurrence."<sup>12</sup> In *Culture X* Purdy records the trances of someone trying desperately to rid himself of his sexual identity, while falling uncontrollably into a new one. Freeman's fantasy leads him away from his cultural memory into a grid of the impossible. As with all of Purdy's projects, *Culture X* becomes an exorcism of both private and public demons, an investigation of the strange worlds of the imagination that constantly assault our waking and sleeping hours.

One of Purdy's most recent projects is *The Inversion of the World* (1988), represented at the Saidye Bronfman Centre by a variety of maps floating under a thin layer of water. In this work, Purdy has taken the world's landmass and turned it into water and vice versa. In the atlas that is part of the work, it is proposed that the inversion resulted because of a profound need for change as the world approached the third millennium consumed by famine, spiritual decay, the AIDS pandemic and

financial catastrophes. Our acquired understanding of geography, politics, east-west is washed away: New York and Lisboa are now sister cities on the opposite sides of the same continent, Atlantica; New York and San Francisco are now separated by the North American Ocean.

Former island nations like Japan once defined themselves through their isolation; but now they are part of large continents with close neighbours and must change their self-references ... China, originally a continental power, is now dispersed on innumerable tiny islands.<sup>13</sup>

Purdy gives us in this project not only the inversion of the political and geographical world but also the ways such an inversion might change our other assumptions and fragments of knowledge.

There are a number of other projects in this exhibition. *The Sacred Circuit* (1975-77), a performance of 35 dances inspired by the floor plans of sacred architectural sites in Europe and Asia, is presented here by photographs of dances and drawings in sand. *Progeria Longaevus* (1988-89) traces the life of a man who lived 1000 years due to an illness that enforces the immune system. On a piece of handmade paper, one foot wide and 365 feet long, paintings and drawings represent this man's various identities as well as corresponding historical and fabricated events. *Urbis Orbitum: to rise, we must push against the ground onto which we have fallen* (1990-91), a relief model of the island of Montreal, toys with our understanding of geography and perception.

Throughout "The Poisoning of Reality" Purdy manipulates politics: sexual, geographical, personal and other. He does not just invert them — he demands that we alter our habits of perception and interpretation. In the show's exhibition guide Purdy states:

*poison is both a killer and a cure. I poison the systems of reality through the intentional creation of scurrilous entries ... The poison I am trying to leak into the system is the metaphor. The symptom of this poison is the collapse of dualistic and critical thinking. Medieval medicine recognised that poisoning could be a curative activity.*

What makes Purdy's work different from much contemporary art making is that he does not just intellectualise the process, point in the general direction of doubt or redefinition and then leave the rest to the viewer. Instead, he assaults the way the mind works. Locked within our senses and burdened by history (what Foucault calls "the most cluttered area of our memory" — *Order*, p.219) we become lethargic and habit-bound creatures. Purdy's "poison" leaks into us through our senses and our

synapses. In a recent article "Disintegrated History,"

Donald Kuspit states:

*Art says that one does not completely belong to history ... Art suggests that one does not know one's own true interests; art itself is a way of beginning to know them. Art proposes a renewal of interest in oneself and the world. It is a renewal that makes them look radically different, that is, convertible into something unknown and seemingly unknowable but of consummate interest, and thus something that seems beyond history.*<sup>14</sup>

Purdy has put these words in action. He pours a curious potion into our imaginations. The mind of the viewer wants to understand the unknown curiosities that Purdy presents, wants to suspend disbelief long enough to allow this metaphorical poison to work its magic. Purdy has become a master of subversion, because we are willing victims, our minds (led by our senses and by the gaps in our imagination) are swallowed up, co-opted by his playful meanderings, his seemingly harmless games.



Detail, *Corpus Christi* (1983-84)  
Mixed media, lifesize

## Notes

1. Richard Purdy, *Fictions Historiques* (Corbeil Essonnes: Centre d'art contemporain CAC Pablo Neruda, 1990), p.2.
2. Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves, eds., *Artists on Art: From the XIV to the XX Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1945), p.21
3. Purdy in correspondence with the author, May 1990
4. Exhibition Guide for "The Poisoning of Reality"
5. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p.342 (hereafter referred to as *Order*)
6. T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), p.14
7. Richard Purdy, *Journal of the Society for the Propagation of Non-Exant Culture* (and related subjects) Ottawa, n.d., p.59 (hereafter referred to as *Journal*)
8. *Journal*, p.62
9. *Journal*, pp.62-63
10. Richard Purdy, "FURIAE: The History of Culture X," in *Rubicon* 9, Montreal, 1987, p.82 (hereafter referred to as *Rubicon*)
11. *Rubicon*, p.88
12. Renee Baert, curator, "Enchantment/Disturbance," The Power Plant, Toronto, 1989, p.31
13. Richard Purdy, *The Inversion of the World: A geo-metaphorical atlas* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1990), p.vi
14. Donald Kuspit, "Disintegrated History," in *C 23*, Toronto, 1989, p.19