

# IN THE ALLEY

Massive retrospective captures four decades of Wilf Perreault's passion for painting Saskatchewan's back alleys

**F**ew painters have dedicated their lives to a single subject. Wilf Perreault is one of them. Born in 1947, near Albertville, Saskatchewan, the Fransaskois artist has spent the last four decades chronicling Saskatchewan's back alleys. Neither as romantic as Monet's haystacks nor as raw as Rembrandt's self-portraits, Perreault's scenes have nevertheless captured the imagination of people across the country. Now, his career is the focus of *In The Alley*, a mammoth retrospective organized by the MacKenzie Art Gallery.

"He's succeeded in doing something very rare, which is to create a living, four-dimensional portrait of a single space," said Timothy Long, head curator at the MacKenzie. "He's painted the alley from every conceivable angle, but he's also painted it at

every time of day, in every season, and over the course of 40 years. I think that kind of a portrait is something that is rarely seen, and is quite remarkable." In addition to more than 40 paintings, *In The Alley* includes a monumental wraparound mural, a documentary film, and a book featuring contributions from 12 different writers and poets. "We last did a Wilf Perreault solo show back in 1978," Long said with a laugh. "I think we were overdue for another good look at his work."

Perreault did not intend to devote his life to back alleys; he trained as a modernist abstract painter. But high school art teachers with young families have little time for making art. According to Long, alleys were both plentiful and filled with opportunities to experiment. Armed with a camera, Perreault wandered Regina's neighbourhoods, looking for icy puddles and gapping

potholes full of water. "By painting reflections, he could satisfy both desires simultaneously, to be a realist painter and an abstract painter," Long said.

Perreault's paintings are more than just exercises in form, however: they are also about transition. Back alleys are no longer an essential part of the urban landscape. "I think that his paintings register a loss and a disappearance in our urban fabric, and that there's a melancholy associated with that for anybody who grew up with them," Long said. "They recognize that the alley was a place where a whole secret life unfolded." These

secret lives are as varied as those who led them. Children played shinny and learned to ride bicycles. Teenagers smoked cigarettes and made out. Dogs barked. Perreault's paintings may be devoid of life, but hints of human presence are everywhere.

"As he's continued to paint this subject, and as alleys fade deeper into their afterlife, his painting has changed as well," Long said. "It's become much more reflective. Starting in the '90s, he started painting frames around the edges of his back alley images. In the last decade, he's used this circular format, or tondo, which is very much like a porthole. I think that really captures the sense of looking back, of reflection, and of memory — which is at the core of his work." These experiences are captured in the documentary, which was made by Jan Nowina-Zarzycki and Rob King and features interviews alongside a portrait of the artist at work, and the book — an atypical exhibition catalogue that swaps personal essays for critical examinations.

The feelings evoked by Perreault's alleys are as vivid for Long as they are for anyone else. The curator has been

involved in the Saskatchewan community for many years, and make the retrospective more an exhibition of paintings. "I when I was eight or nine, looking in the night sky," he said. "We remember seeing it silhouette that deep sapphire blue you prairies and thinking to myself going to remember this moment the rest of my life." At that moment was standing inside of a Wilf painting — I just didn't know

*In the Alley*

Through Jan 4, 2015 @ MacKenzie

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