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## Canada Artist Portraits

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### FLATLANDERS

SASKATCHEWAN: September 19, 2008 to January 4, 2009, Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon

BY: Betsy Rosenwald



Stacia Verigin, *Entireland* (detail), sawdust and glue, 2003 - present. Image courtesy of the artist.

Flatlanders: Saskatchewan Artists on the Horizon introduces a new generation of prairie artists who are redrawing the parameters of place. They reach beyond the physical reality of flat land to explore social, metaphysical, conceptual, even scientific methods of mapping its geography. In traversing these alternative landscapes, they are shaking up the conventional notion of regionalism.

Mendel Art Gallery curators Dan Ring and Jen Budney have chosen an opportune time to showcase the work of emerging Saskatchewan artists. The exhibition spotlights a diverse group that includes multimedia and interdisciplinary artists and also reflects the province's growing First Nations cultural perspective. It also served as an

excellent means of introducing Budney, who is new to both Saskatchewan and the Mendel, to the province's flourishing art scene.

Ring and Budney adopted a broad curatorial approach to allow for diversity. They visited studios in Regina, Pense, Moose Jaw, Prince Albert, and Saskatoon, selecting 17 artists with two to ten years of professional experience. They had to have a clear direction, a strong engagement with personal process and ideas, a completed a body of work, and an optimistic future. "Because the artists are based in Saskatchewan, their ideas often relate to the region," says Budney. "Otherwise, we are presenting a huge range, including ceramics, new media, painting, multimedia, and sculpture." The Flatlanders include Amalie Atkins, Marc Courtemanche, Wally Dion, Chris Gardiner, Seema Goel, Lee Henderson, Kiyoko Kato, Michelle Lavalley, Zachari Logan, Nancy Lowry, Clint Neufeld, Jacob Semko, Stacia Verigin, Sean Whalley and John Henry Fine Day, Gabriel Yahyahkeekoot, and Yuka Yamaguchi.

Flatlanders also relates to a complex of geographical and social influences and relationships that are unique to the province. The title asks that we examine the artists and their work in the context of these influences, posing questions such as, "What are the effects of unlimited space on the psyche of an artist? What limits does it impose?"

What the artists have in common is the ease with which they jump the boundaries between disciplines, media, materials, and cultures. Regina-based multimedia artist Lee Henderson's work examines and interprets Buddhism, reconceived



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through Western eyes. In his investigations into human nature, such as the 2005 video installation, *Blueprint for a New Gravity*, he has said he's interested in "the ways in which we accept, deny or evade the knowledge of our own impermanence."

Marc Courtemanche, also based in Regina, transposes techniques from one tradition to another, using clay in place of wood to recreate everyday objects like chairs. Saskatoon's Clint Neufeld casts engine blocks to create his detailed glazed ceramic sculptures. Stacia Verigin, also of Saskatoon, concocts sticks and wooden landscapes out of sawdust — a byproduct of their destruction — and glue in an act of creation that is both poignant and ironic in its attempt to reverse the impact of an industrial process. In their choice of materials, methods, and subject matter, all three artists underscore the relationship between material and form.



Clint Neufeld, *Ten thousandths over*(detail), ceramic and glaze, 2008.

Painter Wally Dion is a member of Yellow Quill First Nation (Salteaux), based in Saskatoon. He also uses unorthodox materials to re-create traditional icons, focused on First Nations identity. His *Star Blankets* appear to be traditional quilts and blankets, but in reality are constructed from painted computer circuitry boards.

Regina's Seema Goel, a multimedia artist and writer with a background in environmental biology, merges disciplines to explore the interface between art, science, and critical theory. A recent interactive piece featured small lab mice singing "Happy Birthday, DNA."

That this engagement with complex juxtapositions is taking place across the expansive prairie landscape gives lie to the suggestion that there is no "there" out there. These are emerging artists for an emergent Saskatchewan, one that is grappling with the geopolitical realities of participation on a larger world stage. In their fluid interpretations of subject, style, media and discipline, these Flatlanders look out beyond the province's borders. While they are influenced by place, they are not confined by it.