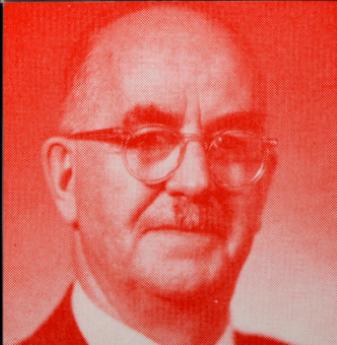
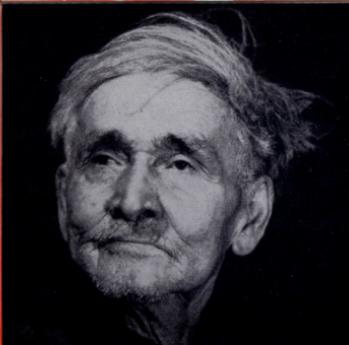


SPRING 2015
SETH: DOMINION



EXHIBITIONS | CENTRAL GALLERY AND MEDIATHEQUE

SETH: DOMINION

Curated by Andrew Hunter

Exhibition tour organized by University of Lethbridge Art Gallery

APRIL 17 TO JULY 5, 2015

Artist Talk: Friday, April 17, 6:00 pm, RPL Film Theatre

Opening Reception: April 17, 7:00 pm, Central Gallery

Dunlop Curator Tour: Saturday May 16, 2:00 pm, Central Gallery

Seth's Dominion

by Josephine Mills, Director/Curator, University of Lethbridge Art Gallery

“... we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, or culture – above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things.”¹

I have never been comfortable with the jingoistic, flag-waving type of Canadian nationalism. Shouting “we’re number 1” and trying to copy American-style patriotism does not fit with my sense of being Canadian. I enjoy cheering for our athletes, but even the idea of sitting with my Dutch friends in the super loud “orange” section at speed-skating events seems like visiting another country. One of the remarkable aspects of Seth’s exhibition is that he manages to create a truly



Canadian experience: not a space that shouts “I am Canadian” as soon as you enter, but a quiet insistence on the local and the specific that recreates the feel of Canadian-ness before the inundation of American and global media. A fictional city set around the 1950s, Dominion stands in for mid-size Canadian centres of the mid-century era. It is a place where quirky T.V. personalities broadcast to the immediate area, using the lowest possible production values, and then go out to host high school talent shows. Seth has captured the specificity of a particular Canadian experience without directly recreating an actual city. His buildings and imagery are general enough that someone from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan can connect as easily as someone from Hamilton, Ontario.

Prior to bringing *DOMINION* to the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, I talked to colleagues that had hosted the exhibition at other galleries. They all raved about the popularity of the show. Visitors loved it and attendance was high. Seth’s stature as a cartoonist, and his ability to connect with a fan base that does not necessarily attend art galleries was part of *DOMINION*’s success, but regular gallery visitors and people unfamiliar with Seth’s work also fell in love with his installation. *DOMINION* connects with those who lived in the era Seth depicts, as well as with younger generations. I think I can speak to both even though I am only old enough to have caught only the tail end of the 1960s (my parents’ rejection of mass media meant that I grew up with a more historical than real-time pop culture experience – we still had a black and white TV with two channels long past the arrival of cable). In the same way that *DOMINION*



manages to represent Canadian cities of its era, Seth's installation resonates across generations as it references an earlier time that most visitors know through experiencing the remnants: mid-century architecture and design, re-runs on TV or YouTube, books and photographs, or stories from an older generation.

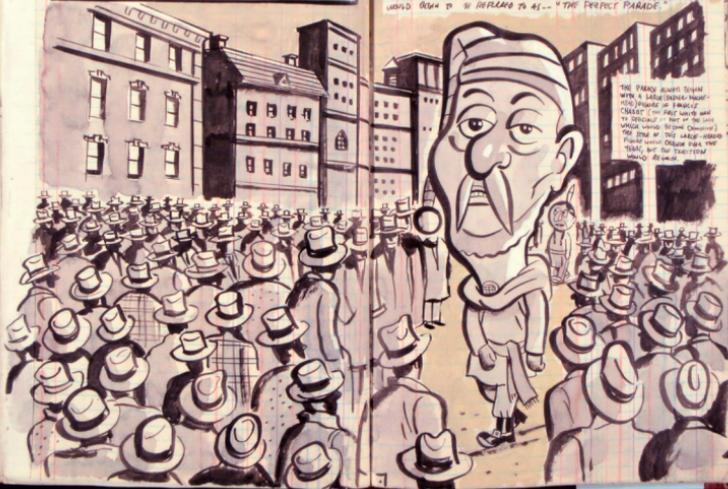
Another key part of *DOMINION*'s allure is its authenticity. I am aware that saying so is hopelessly uncool – and the exhibition is certainly not that – but in the age of hipsters, irony is dominant and arguing that this exhibition rings true is not the expected thing to say. One alternative title for my essay could be “The Work of Art in the Age of Smirking Hipsterism.” Like Walter Benjamin's famous text that includes a discussion about the qualities of art when surrounded by mechanical reproduction, Seth's referencing of historical imagery and design stands out, and appeals all the more, because his work is neither ironic nor superficial.² Seth has an encyclopedic knowledge of Canadian history and of Canadiana which he draws on to create both *Dominion* and his cartoons. The work is based in this research even if not readily apparent because the results are fun and people find it easy to connect with the work. Seth's commitment to his vision of *Dominion* is core to what makes the project so compelling, a complex experience of a fictional town, which gives visitors a wonderful feeling of place. Visitors might not notice all the elements that create this experience, such as the faint sound of trains in the distance and a rain storm, but are aware of being immersed in the artist's imagining of our shared cultural memory.



Perhaps the most important aspect that connects gallery visitors to *DOMINION* is that the entire project puts the artist's process on display – the exhibition is Seth's process for creating his cartoons. Initially, Seth started producing the buildings to work out plans for a graphic novel. The buildings were like 3D doodles to help him understand the location in which his characters would live and work. The graphic novel never happened (though he now might return to it), but *Dominion* blossomed into an installation of its own, as well as the setting for his cartoons. As any gallery professional can tell you, viewers love learning about the artist's process: displays with printing presses and artists tools, the stages of a woodcut, or working drawings are always popular. Whether a person is knowledgeable and can discern specific aspects in the artist's technique or a neophyte just being introduced to this information, everyone appreciates a behind-the-scenes tour of the artist's approach. And *DOMINION* is even better than that. The exhibition provides access to the artist thinking aloud via delightful miniature buildings, sketches in ledger books, and imagery for the walls of the space.

The brilliance of *DOMINION* is that the exhibition resonates far beyond the simple enjoyment of the buildings and other objects. A visitor can revel in the delightful details on a drive-thru ice cream stand or the totem pole in front of the civic art gallery. At the same time, these details work together to build an experience of a shared identity and a space that is both evocative of life in Canada a few decades ago, and of our current imagination of that era.

THE PERFECT PARADE



THE BEST PART OF EVERY YEAR COMES WHEN A PARADE OCCURS IN THE BROAD-
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 GREAT PARADE WOULD BE A GREAT ONE IN ALL THE YEARS IN THE CITY THE
 GREAT PARADE THROUGH A COMBINATION OF COINCIDENCE AND MODERN SCIENCE IT
 WOULD BE THE BEST OF THEM ALL IN THE DECADE THAT PASSES THE PARADE
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 WOULD BE THE GREAT PARADE.

¹ Bill Brown, "Things Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001), 4.

² See Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Trans. J.A. Underwood, (London: Penguin Books, 2008). (The original essay was first published 1936).

Artist Biography:

Seth is the cartoonist behind the infrequent comic book series, *Palookaville*. As an illustrator, he has produced commercial works for almost all of the major Canadian and American magazines. His work has appeared inside and on the cover of *The New Yorker*. He won the Harbourfront Festival Prize in 2011. Seth's books are published by Drawn & Quarterly of Montreal.





CREDITS

SETH *Dominion* installation views, 2015

photos: Don Hall

SETH *City Founder and the Citizens*, 2015, digital prints on mesh vinyl banners

Commissioned by Dunlop Art Gallery and Regina Public Library, 2015

photo: Eric Hill



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Thursday & Friday 9:30 am to 6:00 pm

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Office

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Regina, Saskatchewan

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Closed statutory holidays



Dunlop Art Gallery researches and presents a diverse range of contemporary artworks, and promotes visual literacy through activities that include exhibitions, programs, publishing and collecting. For more information, please visit our website, www.dunlopartgallery.org.

FREE ADMISSION

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