



# Made in Quebec

Reinhard Reitzenstein: *Transformer*, 2000, found white spruce tree, two disused hydro pylons, at *Cimes et Racines Art and Nature Symposium*; photo Roger Gaudreau; courtesy Cimes et Racines

Quebec's population is close to seven and a half million, not that much more than Ireland's. Like so many places, including Ireland, it is a space where cultures meet and sometimes clash. Art in Quebec, however, walks its own path, as John K. Grande now reports.

Art in Quebec has many of the intrigues and complexities of art anywhere these days. Montreal was the place where automatism, perhaps Canada's only self-generated art movement of the early post-War years exploded on the scene. A mixture of tachisme and automatic painting, automatism was largely a reaction to the conservatism of Quebec's Catholic post-War society. The stereotype persisted that Quebecers were hewers of wood and drawers of water. The painter Paul-Emile Borduas' *Refus Global* manifesto in 1948 ushered this era in and the Quiet Revolution that followed radically transformed Quebec society from an English-dominated colony to a full-fledged francophone province. The hub of the Quebec cultural scene, Montreal is a vibrant

multicultural city renowned for its innovations in dance, theatre, the visual arts and film. The paradigms dominant in art the world over exist here as elsewhere, and the art-for-art's-sake attitude one feels here is fuelled by a generous arts-funding program, sometimes to the detriment of the art being shown in the public museums and galleries which can be predictable—though never as self-conscious as Toronto, where New York values and aspirations are dominant even in the experimental areas of art-making.

The Irish links are strong here, from the days when the coffin ships brought immigrants from Ireland to Grosse Ile east of Quebec City on the St. Lawrence river during the Diaspora and potato famines over 150 years ago, many of

whom died from typhoid, cholera, and famine. Scott MacLeod's *The Great Hunger* show recently at Bishops University Art Gallery in Lennoxville' explored these Irish roots and linked them to Amerindian culture ironically through the potato. A native food source introduced into Europe around 1570 by the Spaniards, the potato became a popular staple for Irish. The potato famines of over a century and a half ago, caused large scale Irish immigration to Canada. MacLeod draws cross-Atlantic links in his mixed-media-on-wood painting titled *Digging for Our History*, 1999, where we see a woman digging potatoes surrounded by children juxtaposed with an image of the potato plant. Smaller scenes of the Grosse Ile crosses of unnamed immigrants in rows are set next to rows of planted potato drills and we



Scott MacLeod: *Digging for our History*, 1999, mixed media on wood; courtesy the artist

read an excerpt from *Digging* by Seamus Heaney. A tipi-shaped canvas, *What the Buffalo Provides*, 1999, pays tribute to the sophisticated ecological integration that was, and still is, part of Native culture in North America. A central painted image of a buffalo has words painted around it that describe native uses for the buffalo: the brain (hide tanning), the horn (cups, spoons, powder horns), the tail (ceremonial ornaments), bone (food, knives, ornament), hide (clothing), and buffalo chips or manure (fuel).