

Manitoba has spent almost \$2.5 million on the campaign over the last two years, paying a consulting firm to come up with the Spirited Energy brand and buying newspaper and television advertisements aimed at attracting people and businesses to the province.

The campaign has come under fire from critics who say the Spirited Energy slogan is vague and baffling. The opposition has said the campaign seems to be more focused on promoting the NDP government than on promoting the province....CBCNews, Oct. 3, 2007

A number of years ago, the province of Manitoba paid a significant amount of public funds to an advertising agency to develop a new “brand” for the province. The resulting slogan and public relations exercise euphemistically named “Spirited Energy”. It would give many Manitobans pause to reflect on the province’s motives and, to be perfectly honest, caused most of them to laugh their asses off at the provincial government for the waste of money.

What the government didn’t seem to get (or at least their advertising agency didn’t) is that Manitoba has never been about “spirit” or “energy”. This is not a slag of Manitoba folk, it’s just that that kind of bizarre self aggrandizement doesn’t make sense here. Manitobans I think prefer a “real-ness” that defies simple description.

The government would have been better off using that money to buy art from Manitoba artists. And that would certainly include work by Ian August.

As a member of the 2-6 collective of artists, and as an individual artist, Ian August has been that most interesting of cultural commentators: someone rooted enough in a place to understand its nuances, and removed enough aesthetically and generationally, to also understand its foibles, eccentricities and demons. His practice incorporates both a collaborative aspect (with the art collective 2-6) as well as his own solo practice.

He and the rest of the “crew” (including artists...) are well known for their public interventions, (pre-fab paintings they nail to poles, walls, etc...really, any outdoor space they come across.

Challenging and irreverent, much of August’s work speaks to our obsessions with mass culture, but he also delves interestingly in Winnipeg’s particular psyche. Other times, such as with his guerilla art (pre-fab’s) he shows an eagerness to engage a “public” definition of art. And, in other works he explores the spectrum between abstraction and representation. His work is thoughtful, well executed and ingenious.

In “Winnipeg Hydro”, his most recent solo exhibition, he has combined a selection of his iconoclastic drawings and a new suite of oil paintings. August’s trademark humour is most evident in the drawings. His puns and double entendre’s are, as always, whimsical, intriguing and inventive. Using iconic images from celebrity, popular culture and advertising worlds, he infuses his drawings with subtle, and not so subtle ironic references.

But it is the paintings that show a new direction for his work. Although part of August’s oeuvre has always been large scale paintings (most often featuring members of 2-6), these new works take a decided turn in content. These new representational works mark a departure of sorts for August. Well known as a member of the 2-6 (or two-sicks) collective, August is best known for his smaller “book cover” paintings and drawings. These works, full of ironic wit and social commentary, are nonetheless far removed from these latest works.

Lush and resonant, there is a sensuousness in the paintings that belie their subject matter; an intense subjectivity grounded in the Winnipeg (prairie, Manitoba) personality. A self reflective act....an homage of sorts, but not maudlin. The works in “Winnipeg Hydro” are not elegiac. Rather, they are intuitive, finding those points of intersection between human encroachment in natural environs...they are snapshots of a place. In this case, our place.

August’s sense of place is established by those “man made” objects that are manifested in our landscape.....transforming it, infecting, affecting, and being affected by it. Without resorting to anthropomorphic landscape traditions, August infuses his paintings with a life and a dynamism that resides in the popular imagination of Winnipeggers. They are iconic in their own, unprepossessing way. They resonate with a geographical ontology, ideally suited to Winnipeg’s sense of itself.

While the paintings can be seen as “realist”, August’s is a view that looks “between” the frames of the film that is Winnipeg....Like fellow Winnipegger Guy Maddin, August creates an imaginistic, though totally real world, not by populating, but by de-populating it... he leaves it to the viewer to fit themselves in his landscapes.

His is a Winnipeg as much moored to it’s history as the tourist riverboats he has painted moored to their docks.....frozen by natural forces, victims of weather constrained by their seasonality. The flaking paint of their hulls and the ice they are trapped in speaking to their (and our) fragility.

...an icebreaker navigates the red river, seemingly erratic...tracing fissures in the frozen river...

...the suspended car chassis that acts as a sign for Tessler’s junk yard, A throwback and a symbol of conspicuous consumption.

...two ice huts.....an attachment to place that encompasses its cultural, social and atmospheric peculiarities...

It is an homage to the unforgiving...No, screw that, only someone from outside the prairies would actually refer to the wind as “unforgiving”. Ian August understands that. Instead, his is a tribute to the wind, the ice and the people who challenge, fight and embrace it. His paintings reveal truths about the places that are instantly recognizable to anyone from here. His is a smart and robust visual language that contains entry points to who we are and where we live. Each painting in its own way speaking to the solitude, the humour and yes, even the “spirit” that is life in Winnipeg. And that’s pretty cool!

Ian August is going to be leaving Winnipeg. The siren song of post graduate studies in the “Big Smoke” (Toronto) apparently could not be resisted. Ian is an amazingly talented, incisive artist and a good friend. He has a lot to offer, and we will be hearing a lot from him in the future. Good luck Ian, as you explore your distinctive vision. In that spirit, I’d like to offer the following lyrics from Jimmy Buffett’s “Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes” to help send you on your way.

Good luck, dude...

CHANGES IN LATITUDES, CHANGES IN ATTITUDES

By Jimmy Buffett

I took off for a weekend last month
Just to try and recall the whole year
All of the faces, and all of the places
Wonderin' where they all disappeared

I didn't ponder the question too long
I was hungry and went out for a bite
Ran into a chum with a bottle of rum
And we wound up drinkin' all night

It's those changes in latitudes, changes in attitudes
Nothing remains quite the same
With all of our running, and all of our cunning
If we couldn't laugh we would all go insane

Reading departure signs in some big airport
Reminds me of the places I've been
Visions of good times that brought so much pleasure
Makes me want to go back again

If it suddenly ended tomorrow
I could somehow adjust to the fall
Good times, and riches, and son-of-a-bitches
I've seen more than I can recall

These changes in latitudes, changes in attitudes
Nothing remains quite the same
Through all of the islands and all of the highlands
If we couldn't laugh we would all go insane

I think about Paris when I'm high on red wine
I wish I could jump on a plane
So many nights I just dream of the ocean
God, I wish I was sailing again

Oh yesterday's over my shoulder
So I can't look back for too long
There's just too much to see waiting in front of me
And I know that I just can't go wrong

With these changes in latitudes, changes in attitudes
Nothing remains quite the same
With all of my running, and all of my cunning
If I couldn't laugh I just would go insane
If we couldn't laugh we just would go insane
If we weren't all crazy we would go insane