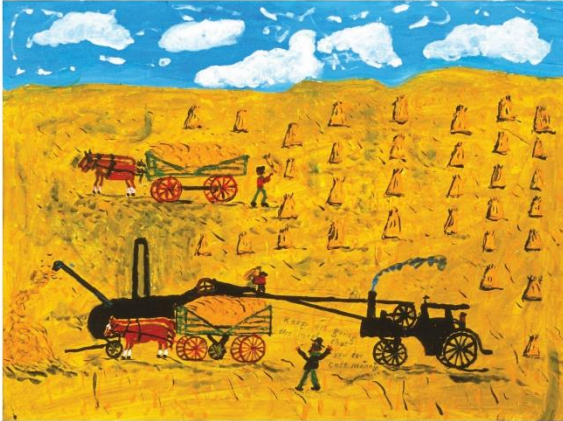


Keep On Going

Frank & Victor Cicansky



This exhibition features the paintings, sculptures and craft objects of folk artist, Frank Cicansky, in dialogue with the ceramics and sculptural work of his son, internationally renowned artist, Victor Cicansky. The presentation of these artists' works together offers an opportunity to consider the shared values, creative drives and narratives of memory, place and origin that inform both of their artistic practices. Together these works reflect a sincere and compelling response to place, offering immigrant narratives of first and second generation settler Canadians in southern Saskatchewan, while also exploring the influential connections between our province's folk art and funk art genres.

Frank Cicansky's work not only reflects his skilled craftsmanship, from his training as a blacksmith and wheelwright in Romania before he immigrated in 1926, but offers narratives of his experiences of settlement in his new country, in the Wood Mountain area south of Moose Jaw. Carvings and wooden sculptures of pioneer life depict horses and wagons of threshing teams he would have worked on and the barns and houses he would have built, while the paintings, including a series titled *In the Thirties*, highlight the hardships of settling in southern Saskatchewan. Known as a great storyteller, Frank chose to depict these memories visually in paint, while incorporating mixed media and text. He also shared the memories behind each image verbally, having them recorded in audio, which have been transcribed in his voice, in his spoken vernacular, and included on the exhibition labels. In these folk images with incorporated text, we see depictions of farmsteads abandoned during the Depression by desperate families with their belongings piled in a wagon, a dead horse, an empty well and clouds of

grasshoppers. Images following the Depression Years depict lush farms and the hard and rewarding work of the harvest. Franks' paintings present an immigrant story of Saskatchewan and it is not an easy one. It is filled with setbacks and disappointment, from crippling drought to unscrupulous dealings and probable racism that Cicansky endured, but it is also a story of perseverance and an identification with this land in which he made it his own.

"Keep on going" was a common phrase of Frank Cicansky. It spoke of his sheer determination to persevere through life's many challenges. This endless determination, along with a strong work ethic, a love for making things and for craftsmanship and a deep connection to the land, were values that he passed on to his children. This is evident in the work and artistic practice of Victor Cicansky, whose wonderfully crafted and playful forms reflect his own connections to the place and land that he grew up in and the memories and experiences of growing up in a Romanian Immigrant family. Born and raised in east Regina, in an area heavily populated by eastern Europeans and referred to at the time as Garlic Flats, Victor has drawn his inspiration and developed his own iconography in his work from the memories and landscape of his childhood neighbourhood and backyard. Works like *Cloud* and *Prairie Waterworks* are based on the artist's memories of outhouses in his neighbourhood, where he established a market as an adolescent, building them for his neighbours, while *Pile of Bones* references Regina's colonial history. The memory and significance of his family's garden and pantry, not only as an important source of sustenance, but as a prairie experience, an urban connection to the land and a reflection of his cultural upbringing, has long influenced Vic's work. The piece, *Prairie Blue with October Pickles*, draws on his memories of canning in the fall, while works like *Armchair Garden* evolved from a simple memory of his grandmother, who once left a large cabbage sitting in a chair and when Vic asked her why, she stated, "Cabbages have to sit too."ⁱ From its connections with the soil to the fruits of its labour, the garden has been his means of connecting to his cultural and familial roots, responding to place and expressing the concerns of his time. The garden and its produce become metaphors, art references, environmental statements and objects of humour.

The presentation of these works together also offers an opportunity to reflect on the influential connections between two of our province's most pervading art genres, folk art and funk art. Frank Cicansky began painting in the 1970s, being driven like other folk artists to depict his experiences and memories of places and events through direct and sincere expression. His start in painting began at the time when the significance of folk art was becoming recognized by collectors, curators and contemporary artists, who appreciated the abstract nature or quality of their work but also the honesty, integrity and raw motivation of their

expression. This interest in folk art in the 70s came at a time when contemporary prairie artists were looking for an alternative to New York modernism and were wanting to make work that was situated in this place, not the larger urban centres, and spoke to the world and experiences that they knew. Folk art inspired contemporary artists, like Vic Cicansky, Joe Fafard, Russell Yuristy and David Thauberger, giving them permission to respond to their own regional experience within mainstream contemporary art.

This inclination towards a regionalist expression was reinforced when these artists were introduced to California Funk, a ceramics movement which focused on the sculptural possibilities of clay to make art about everyday subjects, responded to popular culture, involved humour, had an affinity for surrealism and embraced personal narrative. Cicansky, Fafard and Thauberger all went to California for graduate or post-graduate work, where they found support for their interest in folk and vernacular art sources and were given the confidence to see their “own culture and historical circumstances, the prairie experience, as equal to any other for cultural investigation”.ⁱⁱ While in California, Vic met David Gilhooly, a Funk clay artist, who eventually came to Regina to teach at the U of R for a period of time, alongside Vic, Joe Fafard and Russell Yuristy, and a new, exciting ceramic movement was born. The Regina Clay artists formed relationships with many of our province’s recognized folk artists, supporting their practices by collecting their work and curating it into exhibitions, as well as collaborating with them. In 1976, Fafard, Yuristy, Thauberger and Vic Cicansky were commissioned by the provincial government, to collaborate on a project for the Montreal Olympics with folk artists Frank Cicansky, Molly Lenhardt, Ann Harbuz, William McCargar, Linda Olefson, Harvey McInnes and Julienne Fafard, creating *The Grain Bin*, a whimsical prairie diorama created out of a full-size, wooden grain bin.

“Any human experience is material for art making”ⁱⁱⁱ. This statement by Victor Cicansky reflects the sincerity and authenticity that has driven his work and that of Frank Cicansky. From a shared love of making things, a connection to the land, a penchant for storytelling and a need to express themselves through image and form comes true and compelling art that speaks to this place.

ⁱ Jacob Boles, *Artist in Residence: Victor Cicansky, The Tower*: Graceland University, <http://gracelandtower.com/2016/04/10/artist-in-residence-victor-cicansky/>; accessed 10 August 2018.

ⁱⁱ Bruce Ferguson, *Victor Cicansky: The Garden As Vessel, Victor Cicansky: Clay Sculpture* (Regina: Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery, 1983), p.9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jacob Boles, *Artist in Residence: Victor Cicansky, The Tower*: Graceland University, <http://gracelandtower.com/2016/04/10/artist-in-residence-victor-cicansky/>; accessed 10 August 2018.