



# tenuous

**an installation**

**tina martel**



## THE PRAIRIE ART GALLERY

### EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR/ CURATOR

The Prairie Art Gallery/Grande Prairie, Alberta  
Robert Steven

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### INTRODUCTION

Eric Cameron

### ESSAY



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Define Design

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## INTRODUCTION

### *tenuous*

A little over a week ago, Tina Martel showed me photographs of the experimental cast from the front end of the truck, produced in the same sort of paper pulp to be used for the actual project in July. I found their impact overwhelming. I have spent much of the time since trying to grasp the reason for their poignancy and the intensity of emotional reaction they induced.

Tina Martel provides some indications in her project description and notes: the truck is a cultural icon of Grande Prairie and Alberta, simultaneously driving their economy and sowing the seeds of their destruction; the final paper cast will be a symbol of the fragility of the environment. Parallel with this dichotomy, she suggests masculine, functional, mechanical and strong, on the one side, and feminine, non-functional, organic and fragile on the other. All these pairings ring true and she also points to parallel fates that await truck and paper cast alike, the truck rusting in the scrap yard, the cast doomed to be reduced to pulp again in water, when the project has run its course.

I am also struck by the contrast of colour with non-colour though perhaps it is, more properly, a contrast of specific colour with all-colour. In the artist's studio, white paper is a neutral base for the application of colour, but white light contains all the colours of the spectrum, so white is at once everything and nothing. Pervasive to the whole project, there is a sense of the eternal merging of opposites, a transcending of the everyday urgency of things by a serene act of reconciliation.... Or is there?

It has often been my observation that when a work of art affects me most deeply I am least able to account for the hold it takes on me. One thing I am sure of: if the actual cast turns anything like the trial run, it will long continue to resonate and challenge interpretation, even after the material structure has finally disappeared. This is a superb project.

Eric Cameron, June 13, 2008  
Calgary, Alberta







If we lose our ability to make meaning—that is to interpret, to find form in the raw materials of life—then we stand in danger of having meaning made for us...

-Ann Lauterback, *The Night Sky*





WHEN TINA MARTEL moved to Grande Prairie in 2001 it only cost 5 cents an hour to park downtown. While she doesn't mention that it now costs 5 times that much at the meter and that the population of the city has grown by over 20,000 since 2004, it's the truck population that staggers Martel. She and her husband drive a car, and in Grande Prairie, car drivers are a visible minority. If she asks people why they need a truck they tell her it's impossible not to have one here. She's been told we need them to work in. We need them to be safe. We need them to drive on the pot-holed gravel roads. It also appears

that we need them to buy milk, visit the laundromat, take a course at the college, watch a movie and raise a family. So, it was inevitable perhaps, but this summer Martel succumbed and got herself a truck. She said she felt both invincible and anonymous as she drove it through Grande Prairie and on to the lawn. There she hopped out, made sure she had the keys, called together her small army of help and to the delight of the lunch crowd at the Legion next door, proceeded to coat the truck in hundreds and hundreds of freshly made fragile sheets of handmade paper.







AS THE PAPER dried each detail of the truck embossed itself into the paper, and it became a blind, tactile, blank page of a being. The truck wore its death mask with dignity. One could not help but recall the news stories of the closing of the General Motors truck plant in Ontario; to interpret the labour intensive process of making and applying the paper as an echo of the labour in an SUV plant, both forms of labour now redundant. The careful, painstaking

process of removing the cast of the paper truck became an archaeological exercise of preserving the memory of Truck, ubiquity turned poignant and uncanny. Oddly, the paper truck made the metal trucks driving past seem transient, and a thing of the past. As one observer noted, the hollow shell of the paper cast created a metaphor of Truck as the hollow shell of boom times in Northern Alberta.







WHILE GRANDE PRAIRIE was named for the rolling grasslands that have made it an agricultural hub since the 1920s, it also has large tracts of forests to the south that feed a Weyerhaeuser kraft pulp mill, a Canfor sawmill and lumberyard, as well as an Ainsworth Oriented Strand board plant. Oil and gas drilling has taken place in the area since the 1950s, but the present oil boom, as well as the discovery of Elmworth gas field in the 1970s, have been a financial boon to the city. A vast network of resource

roads has been carved out of the South Peace wilderness. The roads facilitate the movement of trucks, trucks that are either used for logging or oil and gas development. A forester once told me that more trees are removed in this area by the oil and gas industry than by the forestry sector. A work truck, therefore, runs not only on gas but also on the wood that was growing in the way of the road. Martel's cast paper truck concisely expresses this economy.

SILVERADO



MARTEL IS A multi-media artist whose small-scale works have a political edge often belied by her sense of humour or her feeling for mysticism. Her large-scale poured paintings often use handmade or found paper, and she has cast large items in paper that she and her husband have had to haul home with considerable effort—not having a truck of course. This time, however, Martel’s sensitivity to her environment served not just as inspiration, but became a source of collaboration with Grande Prairie itself, a site-specific work in which hundreds of residents responded, asking questions of Martel and each other. The questions asked of Martel could also be directed at Grande Prairie:

“Why a truck?” In the same way Martel formed her cast around the truck, Grande Prairie forms its development around the truck. However, as absurd as a paper truck may seem, I would argue that there is more developmental logic in its creation than there is, for example, in the design of Grand Prairie. According to the city’s website, Grande Prairie’s Municipal Development Plan is 8 years overdue. Its last Land Use Map was created in 1995 and was meant to be part of a 5-year plan.<sup>1</sup> There is no city planning. Martel reminds us that art is not just about our power to make the world; it is also about our ability to question the rationale that gives form to our world.

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.cityofgp.com/citygov/e/dev/plan/mdp\\_full.htm#Top](http://www.cityofgp.com/citygov/e/dev/plan/mdp_full.htm#Top)







Indeed, "WHY A TRUCK?" should have been asked a long time ago. At this moment it seems that automobile manufacturers were as blind as a paper windshield not to have seen the writing on the wall. In May 1997, the Economist reported that by 2000 "every car plant in America could close, and the world would still have too many cars."<sup>2</sup> To combat overproduction the U.S. auto sector exploited the market for SUV's and small trucks, and now the market for them is rapidly disappearing.<sup>3</sup> The vehicle Martel created in *tenuous*, despite its fragility, its short life, its utter lack of functionality, has an author, we know why it exists, which is more than we can say about the mysterious forces that put an oversupply of trucks on the lot. The reason we can ask directly

about *tenuous* is because Martel created, completed and destroyed the work as an open-ended and interactive installation that took place as the Prairie Art Gallery's contribution to the Street Performer's Festival. She was there the whole time. You could ask her anything you wanted. In fact, the public's presence was integral to the project. Curator Nicholas Bourriaud has coined a name for this kind of work, he calls it relational aesthetics, and it includes projects in which the intersubjective encounters between audience and artist collectively elaborate the meaning of the art through their experiences with one another.<sup>4</sup> Often, the art in relational aesthetics resides in the experience alone, such as a shared meal or a service offered. However, Claire

<sup>2</sup>"Car Crash Ahead," Economist 343 (May 10, 1997): 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Brenner, *The Boom and the Bubble: The U.S. in the World Economy*, (London: Verso, 2002), 259.

<sup>4</sup> Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," October 110, (2004): 51-79.



Bishop articulates a central problem in relational aesthetics, that is, the creation of a “microtopia” in which debate and conflict are erased through a selected audience and orchestrated events in which there are no structures to determine the quality of the relationships or even determine their subject matter.<sup>5</sup> Martel avoided this pitfall of relational aesthetics by creating a meaningful and beautiful object whose precise reading remains open-ended. In the attempt to bring art and life into closer relation to one another, often it’s the art that is the casualty. As Herbert Marcuse wrote “The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e. of those who established it) to define what is real. In this rupture, which is the achievement

of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality.”<sup>6</sup> As previously mentioned, *tenuous* turns the tables on its audience by creating a moment in which a life-sized paper truck makes the economy that runs on trucks seem less real and more transient than the paper. It’s not just Martel’s relationship with Grande Prairie that makes this piece a success; it’s also the lush, handmade, organic quality of the paper, its luminescence, its reality. Its material form, in all its contrast to the forms we normally see on the street, allows us to turn estrangement into a moment of realization able to resonate on both political and personal levels.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 9.



MARTEL DESCRIBES *tenuous* by defining the word as something “so fine and easily broken.” When understood in this light the fragility of the paper cast becomes a symbol for the fragility of the environment. However, Martel transforms what was most vulnerable about the truck, the paper, into its strength. She does this by putting her paper truck

through a series of metamorphoses, finally dissolving it back into pulp, whereby it will become the support for a new series of work. In this same way, Martel turns her own vulnerability, the very real vulnerability of a car driver in a truck town, into a strength by combining the materials of her art practice with a committed and intensive interaction with the wider community.







ANOTHER DEFINITION FOR the word *tenuous* is “something that may not happen.” There is an urgency to this installation, but one Martel expresses through the very careful and time consuming act of finessing the fresh paper onto the truck, the long and technically difficult process of removing the dried cast, as well as by her constant interaction with the public during and after this process. *tenuous* goes beyond the expression of frustration or the

sounds of warning. Martel’s process, which is integral to the significance of the work, also indicates the sheer amount of hard work necessary if we are to overcome the difficulties we collectively face, as embodied by the truck. An overcoming that “may not happen” if we don’t face these difficulties with the same generosity, flexibility and constructive energy that Martel exhibits in *tenuous*.





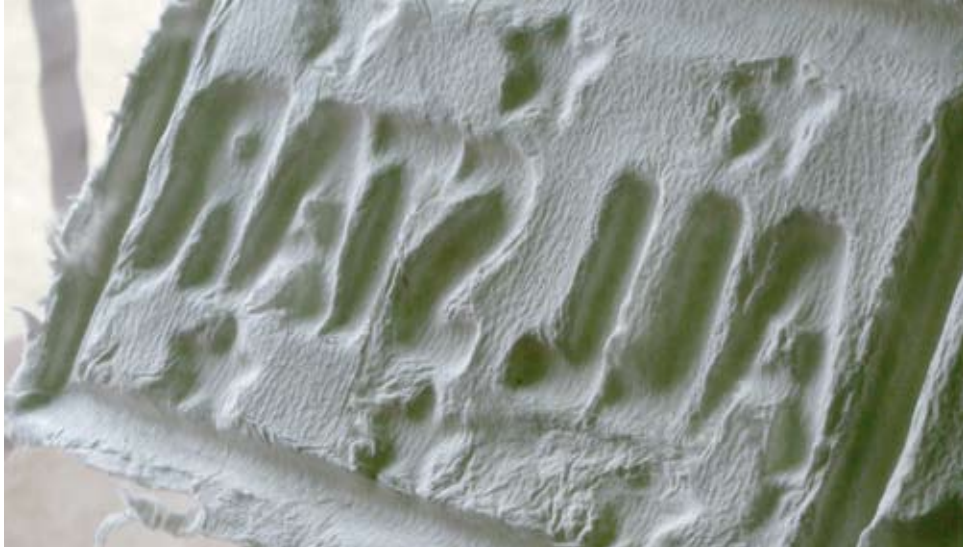
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Tina Martel

## ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

- 1998 - 2000 The University of Calgary Calgary, Alberta  
*Master of Fine Arts*
- 1994 - 1998 The Alberta College of Art & Design Calgary, Alberta  
*Bachelor of Fine Arts (with distinction)*

## EXHIBITIONS

### Solo

- 2008 **FlatLine**  
*ArtFirm* Calgary, Alberta
- 2008 **tenuous**  
*The Prairie Art Gallery* Grande Prairie, Alberta
- 2006 **Personal Geographies**  
*Mezzanine Art Gallery* Calgary, Alberta
- 2005 **Mindscales**  
*ArtFirm* Calgary, Alberta
- 2003 **Frieze**  
*The Prairie Art Gallery* Grande Prairie, Alberta
- 2002 **Towards the End of the Future**  
*Muse Gallery* Grande Prairie, Alberta
- 1998 **Mere Objects**  
*Marion Nicol Gallery* Calgary, Alberta
- 1996 **Tina M. Martel**  
*The Chapel Gallery* North Battleford, Saskatchewan

## EXHIBITIONS

### Group - selected

- 2008 **Summertime**  
*ArtFirm* Calgary, Alberta
- 2007 **Summerscape**  
*ArtFirm* Calgary, Alberta
- 2007 **Rouge**  
*ArtFirm* Calgary, Alberta
- 2006 **We Like Shiny Things**  
*The Prairie Art Gallery* Grande Prairie, Alberta
- 2005 **Alumni Drawing Exhibition**  
*Mezzanine Art Gallery* Calgary, Alberta
- 2005 **...Of One's Own**  
*The Prairie Art Gallery* Grande Prairie, Alberta
- 2004 **Faculty Exhibition 04 - The University of Calgary**  
*The Nickle Arts Museum* Calgary, Alberta
- 2004 **The Anonymous Art Show**  
*ArtFirm* Calgary, Alberta
- 2004 **Grounded**  
*The Prairie Art Gallery* Grande Prairie, Alberta
- 2004 **Intimate Violence**  
*'Guerilla' Site* Grande Prairie, Alberta
- 2004 **Faculty Exhibition - Grande Prairie Regional College**  
*Dawson Creek Art Gallery* Dawson Creek, British Columbia
- 2001-2008 **Faculty Exhibition - Grande Prairie Regional College**  
*GPRC Gallery* Grande Prairie, Alberta
- 2001 **December Show**  
Dorsten, Germany
- 2001 **Mixed Media III International**  
*Period Gallery* Omaha, Nebraska
- 2001 **New Perspectives**  
*Gallery 124* Edmonton, Alberta

- 2001 **International Young Art 2001**  
*Sotheby's* Tel Aviv, Israel
- 2001 **International Young Art 2001**  
*Sotheby's/The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts* New York, New York
- 2000 **Faculty Exhibition - The University of Calgary**  
*The Nickle Arts Museum* Calgary, Alberta
- 2000 **Knock Loudly**  
*The Nickle Arts Museum* Calgary, Alberta
- 2000 **Vorgestellt**  
Potsdam/Berlin, Germany
- 2000 **Vorgestellt**  
Dorsten/Essen, Germany
- 1999 **True Grid** (two person show)  
*The Little Gallery* Calgary, Alberta
- 1999 **Spatial Archives** (two person show)  
*The Little Gallery* Calgary, Alberta
- 1999 **Aspects: Land, Mind, Body**  
*The Centre Gallery* Calgary, Alberta
- 1999 **Surface Tension**  
*The Little Gallery* Calgary, Alberta
- 1998 **ACAD Graduate Exhibition**  
*Illingworth Kerr Gallery* Calgary, Alberta

## EXHIBITIONS

### Traveling

- 2008-2010 **Collective Soul: PNCR 2007**  
*Alberta Foundation for the Arts*  
coordinated through *The Prairie Art Gallery*  
Grande Prairie, Alberta

- 2007-2009 **Brainstorm: 5 Abstract Painters**  
*Alberta Foundation for the Arts*  
 coordinated through *The Prairie Art Gallery* Grande Prairie, Alberta
- 2005 -2007 **Round Table: Prairie North Artist's Residency 2004**  
*Alberta Foundation for the Arts*  
 coordinated through *Art Gallery of Alberta* Edmonton, Alberta
- 2004 -2006 **Fire and Ash**  
*Alberta Foundation for the Arts*  
 coordinated through *The Prairie Art Gallery* Grande Prairie, Alberta

- 1996 **Master's Gallery Scholarship** *The Alberta College of Art & Design*
- 1995 **Illingworth Kerr Scholarship** *The Alberta College of Art & Design*

## SCHOLARSHIPS, AWARDS & GRANTS

- 2008 **Project Grant** *Canada Council for the Arts*
- 2008 **Project Grant** *Alberta Foundation for the Arts*
- 2008 **Research Grant** *Alberta Association of Colleges & Technical Institutes*
- 2008 **Research Grant** *Centre for Research and Innovation – Grande Prairie Regional College*
- 2008 **Artist Grant** *Weyerhaeuser*
- 2007 **Project/Travel Grant** *Alberta Foundation for the Arts*
- 2002 **Slide Purchase** *Alberta Foundation for the Arts*
- 2000 **Thesis-Dissertation Grant** *The University of Calgary*
- 2000 **Graduate Travel Conference Grant** *The University of Calgary*
- 2000 **Faculty of Fine Arts Travel Grant** *The University of Calgary*
- 2000 **Graduate Research Scholarship** *The University of Calgary*
- 1999 **Graduate Research Scholarship** *The University of Calgary*
- 1998 **Dean's Scholarship** *The University of Calgary*
- 1998 **Graduate Research Scholarship** *The University of Calgary*
- 1998 **Commonwealth Fellowship Scholarship Nomination**  
*The Government of Canada*
- 1997 **Liquitex Canada Inc. Scholarship** *The Alberta College of Art & Design*

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE selected

- 2001-  
 present **Grande Prairie Regional College** *Grande Prairie, Alberta*  
*Full-time Tenure Instructor*
- 2005 **Red Deer College** *Grande Prairie, Alberta*  
*Summer Series Instructor*
- 2000-  
 2004 **The University of Calgary** *Calgary, Alberta*  
*Summer Sessional Instructor*

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- Stefansson, Wendy *Tina Martel: tenuous Art of the Peace*, Grande Prairie, Alberta. Art of the Peace Visual Arts Association. Issue #11. Fall/Winter 2008.
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- Kienlen, Alexis *Grande Prairie Artists Receive New ACIDI Funding* *The Daily Herald Tribune, Encore Magazine* Grande Prairie, Alberta. May 1, 2008.
- Dronyk, Dymphny *On being an artist & other survival strategies...* *Art of the Peace*, Grande Prairie, Alberta. Fall/Winter 2003.
- Rinne, Diana *Touching the Surface* *The Daily Herald Tribune, Encore Magazine* Grande Prairie, Alberta. May 3, 2002.
- Author Unknown *Fur Auto-Fans und Philatelisten* *Dorsten Waz* Dorsten, Germany. August 2, 2000.
- Westra, Monique *Fresh Technique: Meet Three of Calgary's Emerging Artists* *Where Magazine, Calgary Gallery Guide*. Calgary, Alberta. Summer 2000.
- McDonald, Mike *Aspects: Land, Mind and Body Exhibit Review* *Fast Forward Weekly*. Calgary, Alberta. Volume 4, Number 25, June 17-23, 1999

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