

Artist creates mane attraction on Red River

DOUG SPEIRS
IN THE DOUG HOUSE



I SPENT Tuesday morning horsing around with my good buddy Jordan Van Sewell, the renowned Winnipeg artist and sculptor.

This involved trudging through the snow behind Jordan's South Point Douglas art studio to a frozen stretch of the Red River, which is where the horsing around comes in.

For his latest public art installation, my famously offbeat buddy has set up a unique display — eight huge horse heads perched on a snowy white expanse of river ice.

What we are talking about here are eight 1.2-metre horse heads carved out of plywood and particle board before being painted a striking shade of indigo blue.

"In July, when I was cleaning up my yard, I set aside this wood with the idea of doing this project," Jordan says, sipping a mug of coffee before we trundle out onto the ice. "I was doing a yard cleanup and I thought, 'There's no way I'm throwing away these sheets of wood; they contain perfectly good horse heads.'"

The heads range from something you'd see in a Disney film to slightly more nightmarish creations.

"I just cut away the bits that didn't look like horse heads," Jordan tells me. "It's a loose interpretation, but definitely recognizable as horses. They're made out of the finest of repurposed materials."

Last winter, Jordan did a trial run, setting up a single horse head on the river ice behind his home. "It looked so good, especially as the wind blew across the frozen river, that I knew my dream would be realized and next year I could populate the river with more horse heads," he says.

Then, a few days before Christmas, with a soul-destroying cold spell descending on the city, Jordan armed himself with an artist's best friend, a jigsaw, cut eight horse heads out of his reclaimed wood, slapped on a layer of paint and hauled them down to the river.

For the record, his frozen herd would have been much larger, but, sadly, he ran out of wood.

"I went down on the river and mounded up eight piles of snow, where I envisioned the horses would go. It took me about an hour to install them. I just stuck them in the snow, then poked it around with my trusty Canadian Tire snow shovel."

In part, Jordan's latest art adventure was inspired by local filmmaker Guy Maddin's acclaimed 2007 surreal mockumentary *My Winnipeg*, which features scenes describing a mythi-



PHIL HOSACK / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Artist Jordan Van Sewell, seen Tuesday with his horse heads on the Red River, says the installation was inspired by local filmmaker Guy Maddin's acclaimed 2007 mockumentary *My Winnipeg*.

cal racetrack fire that drove a herd of horses to plunge into the Red River, where they froze to death, their heads thrusting up from the ice.

In the film, the frozen heads become a sort of creepy winter theme park, a makeshift lover's lane where, as Maddin narrates, "lovers gather to sit among, or even on the frozen heads, for picnics or to spoon beneath the moonlit dome of our city."

"It was inspired by the quirkiness of Guy Maddin," Jordan says as, joined by *Free Press* photographer Phil Hosack, we wander down to the river to inspect his frozen herd.

"It's important that it's the actual site of the alleged historic incident in the movie. As much as it's an homage to Guy, it's also an homage to the power of the Red River."

Out on the ice, the stylized heads evoke eerie, surreal images of a team

of wild horses trying to churn through thick river ice on a desperate quest to reach The Forks.

"This is the magical time when that powerful, moving river is frozen solid and serene," the wizard-bearded artist points out. "To be able to stand here and contemplate these horse heads, you know you won't be able to do that in six months."

The reality is, there are few things Jordan enjoys more than undertaking weird and wonderful projects in the name of art.

The horse heads on the Red serve in part as a form of rebellion against the formal, bureaucratic nature of most public art installations.

"No committees met on the construction or placement of the horses," the artist says, chuckling. "It's just some guy with a jigsaw and a gallon of blue paint. It's for the sheer enjoyment of

making a piece of art so people can look at it and say, 'Wow! That's cool!' Like all art, it can lead to a scintillating conversation.

"There's something definitely Winnipeg about frozen horse heads on the river, especially with the cachet that winter has taken on. It's no longer that horrid season; it's something to look forward to."

For his part, Jordan is hoping his frozen heads inspire Winnipeggers to get outside and do something goofy to celebrate the season, whether building a snow fort, making coloured blocks of ice or even adding heads to his non-thundering herd.

"This is something I've done for the sheer enjoyment of it, an appreciation of winter, an appreciation that you can walk on a frozen river in winter," he says, leaning against one of the larger heads.

"I think, being an artist, if you have the time afforded you that you can do stuff like this, then this is the finest act of creation — you're not doing it for cash; you're doing it for the joy of doing cool stuff."

Before the river thaws, Jordan plans to reclaim his horse heads from the ice so they can be reused next winter. "You don't want to be polluting the river," he says. "Hopefully I can drag them back and use them next winter."

Outdoor art lovers will find the ice-bound heads on the ice where Annabella Street meets the Red River, right at the Louis Bako River Landing. You can also walk from The Forks along the North Winnipeg Parkway.

Trust me, it's one of the few times you'll feel like a rugged individualist by adopting a herd mentality.

doug.speirs@freepress.mb.ca