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Book Review; The Garden of Art: Vic Cicansky, Sculptor

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of Saskatchewan's most important visual artists. Although paperback and inexpensive, the book includes an illustrated text followed by sixty-four pages of full-color photographs that provide a retrospective of Cicansky's work. The author describes Cicansky's sculptures and his working process and records relevant details of his life. Kerr includes a compelling introduction to the artist's childhood. Cicansky, born in 1935, was the first of twelve surviving children of working-class Romanian immigrants, members of a Central European community on the outskirts of Regina. They lived on the fringes of the dominant Anglophone culture, without electricity or running water, and growing and preserving most of their food.

Kerr's writing is based on time spent with Cicansky in the studio and in informal interviews. He retells the artist's stories, many of which vibrantly illustrate the experiences and communities that have influenced his art production. We feel we are doing the next best thing to spending a day with Vic in the studio as he and his practice are brought to life. Kerr's narrative describes the artist's ongoing preoccupation with gardening not only as a subject signifying his Central European/Prairie immigrant working-class roots, but his absorption in subsistence, abundance, sexuality, the value of hard work, and his powerful tie to growing things. Many of the stories, while helping us understand the artist and engage the artwork, are entertaining and humorous as well. We read, for example, of the time a fellow artist who was babysitting Vic's seed potatoes, some of which would have been heritage, got hungry and cooked and ate them.

Kerr uses the term "autobiography of surfaces" to propose that Cicansky's sculptures, often representing objects associated with gardening, food preservation, and the experiences of Central European immigrants to the Canadian Prairies in the first part of the twentieth century, are exclusively about external rather than internal experiences. The author's analysis to some extent proceeds on the assumption that it is appropriate to approach Cicansky's work as if it is neither reflective nor critical.

The Garden of Art: Vic Cicansky, Sculptor. By Don Kerr. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 2004. viii + 160 pp. Photographs, references, list of works, index. \$29.95 paper.

Don Kerr's *The Garden of Art: Vic Cicansky, Sculptor* reviews the career and practice of one

Correspondingly, Kerr's writing is descriptive and light; he narrates appearance and anecdote with little art-historical or academic analysis. And like Cicansky, Kerr asserts the value of a populist language. The book is consequently accessible and enjoyable to a reader with any level of visual art background.

The drawback to Kerr's approach is that we are provided with minimal analysis of the art-historical context and significance of Cicansky's practice. Cicansky's sculpture is vital and resonant to a great extent because of his participation in a broader visual art community that has asserted regionalist and oppositional values and defied tenets of traditional ceramics and modernist art. This movement has been particularly influential on the Canadian Prairies. Unfortunately, there is little theoretical and art-historical writing about the artwork produced by many of these artists, including Cicansky. While *The Garden of Art* provides an engaging and comprehensive description of Cicansky's practice and an invaluable window on his sources, it remains for others to further analyze the critical contributions he has made as a Prairie artist to contemporary North American culture.

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