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Fall 2008

Review of *Marking the Land: Jim Dow in North Dakota*
Photographs and narrative by Jim Dow

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Silberman, Robert, "Review of *Marking the Land: Jim Dow in North Dakota* Photographs and narrative by Jim Dow" (2008). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1315.

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Marking the Land: Jim Dow in North Dakota. Photographs and narrative by Jim Dow. Edited with an essay by Laurel Reuter. Grand Forks: North Dakota Museum of Art; Santa Fe, NM: Center for American Places, 2007. xiii + 207 pp. Photographs, maps, index. \$75.00 cloth, \$34.95 paper.

It may not take special powers of observation to notice the sixty-ton concrete bison next to the interstate on the outskirts of Jamestown, North Dakota. But knowing how to photograph such a subject well demands skill—and Jim Dow has what it takes. Discovering the beauty of a giant coal-mining shovel or the brushwork pattern behind a stenciled “Going Out of Business” notice does require a sharp eye, and he has that, too. Originally invited by Laurel Reuter of the North Dakota Museum of

Art to photograph folk art in the landscape in the early 1980s, Dow, during visits in 2000 and after, had carte blanche to photograph whatever he pleased and even to make cross-border raids into Minnesota and South Dakota.

Like Walker Evans in *American Photographs* (1938), Dow captures the vitality, the humor, and the poetry of folk art and vernacular architecture, beginning with a haunting nighttime shot of a humble concrete block car wash on the book's front cover. Also like Evans, Dow usually hides his artfulness. One exception is a four-part panorama of a minor league baseball game. Dow has become known for his ballpark photographs, and this example, infused with light, shows why.

The folk art documented by Dow offers an aesthetic version of prairie populism. It is a democratic kind of art, often created by individuals with time on their hands and visions in their heads, ranging from religious beliefs that result in signboard sermons, to dreams of warmer climes realized in palm trees made of rebar. Dow also records distinctive shops, restaurants, and bars, along with movie theaters, churches, and other gathering spots, sites of community punctuating the vast openness of the Plains. People are almost never shown, but the photographs are informed by an awareness of human activity, creative and social.

I wonder what Dow might do with the challenge of recent developments, by addressing Wal-Mart—mentioned by him, but not photographed—and other forces shaping the contemporary landscape in ways that offer less room for individuality and local color. As it is, *Marking the Land* offers a selective but deeply satisfying portrait of the Northern Plains. A special bonus is that Dow writes well. He does, however, need to work on his ichthyology. Venturing into Minnesota, he photographed the roadside attraction Big Fish Supper Club. The official state fish may be the walleye, but, contrary to Dow, the Bena behemoth is a muskellunge.

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