

Marge as Life

by Dave McGinn

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The first time Les Paterson saw Mr. Burns naked, the Toronto artist was underwhelmed. The second time, it was a revelation.

It has been more than 15 years since viewers of the hit animated series *The Simpsons* learned that the family's blue-haired matron was an aspiring painter in an episode called "Brush With Greatness."

Four years ago, a rerun of the episode caught Paterson's attention, and he suddenly saw Marge Simpson's nude portrait of Springfield's nuclear baron as having a unique stature in pop culture.

"I came to the conclusion that the painting of Mr. Burns naked might be the most famous painting in North America," says Paterson, a Toronto-based 34-year-old with a fine arts degree from the University of Alberta. "The Scream and the Mona Lisa aside, how many people know about Les Demoiselles

d'Avignon by Picasso? But everybody seems to know the Mr. Burns painting. And it didn't really exist."

So Paterson decided to paint it himself, along with every other painting done by Marge on the show. The result, a collection of more than a dozen works dubbed *The Marge Simpson Project*, is on display this week at Toronto's Lennox Contemporary gallery.

Besides the nude of C. Montgomery Burns — "Provocative, yet powerful," in the words of Springfield's Dr. Hibbard — there are the loving portraits of Marge's teen idol Ringo Starr, the painting of Homer asleep on the couch in his underwear, beer can in hand, a rendering of the Burly paper towel spokesmodel lumberjack and the red sailboat that hangs above the Simpsons' couch.

To re-create each painting, Paterson spent plenty of time hitting "pause" on rented DVDs and doing sketches from the frozen screen. There were a few problems along the way, including the question of how to paint Mr. Burns' penis, which is never shown.

"I had to go on the verbal description," explains Paterson. ("And thank you for not making fun of my genitalia," Mr. Burns says after the unveiling. "I thought I did," replies a surprised Marge.)

"So I gave him a little tiny penis," says Paterson. "And he's an old white male, so he had to be circumcised."

Capturing the colours of the cartoon universe also proved to be a challenge. But Paterson says each of his re-creations is a faithful rendering by a long-time viewer of the show.

"It would be disingenuous to say there isn't an element of fandom in it," he says of the project. "But I don't think it should be dismissed as a pure tribute. I'm trying to get at things that are deeply present in our culture, like the pervasiveness of fictional paintings that are so well known."

Postmodern metaphysics aside, Paterson has a sense of humour about the exhibition.

"It's just such a sweet gimmick sitting there," he said. "I was always scared that I was going to open up the paper or the back of a magazine and someone would have beaten me to it."

His previous work has also explored pop-culture phenomena, but Paterson, who pays the rent driving a delivery van, says he has never done anything as "branded" as this.

Thankfully for him, he hasn't heard from any lawyers yet.

"I think The Simpsons wouldn't be inclined to sue someone over copyright considering the content of the show — every episode is 20 little steals from 20 different sources."

Paterson is hoping the exhibition brings some much needed levity to the art scene in Canada.

"There's a deep pretension in contemporary art. It takes itself very seriously," he says.

With The Marge Simpson Project, he says, "a person will be able to walk in off the street, come into the show, look at it, and have a dialogue with the cultural medium, the cultural milieu and the relationship with the prime medium, television."

If they stopped by last night, they'd also be able to have one of Homer's favourite cold ones, thanks to some creative labeling on Mr. Peterson's part.

"I made Duff beers for the opening."

The Marge Simpson Project runs to July 30 at Lennox Contemporary, 12 Ossington Ave., Toronto. 416-924-7964.