

Art exhibition highlights hockey's vibrancy

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HALIFAX — If hockey is, as they say, an in-your-face game, then any art show that wants to claim hockey is culture had better be right there, too.

Oh, isn't that nice? There, right at the entrance to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's brand new show, *Arena: The Art of Hockey*, is a framed picture of Gary B. Bettman, the commissioner of the National Hockey League.

Look – he has even signed it.

But what's that on it? Someone has taken a red marker and painted devil's horns and an evil beard over the glass.

And the picture has a title: *What an Ass*.

The marked-up photo is Craig Wilms's contribution to this art exhibition that is running concurrently with the world hockey championship, but it is far, far from the only work that strikes visitors like a hockey glove face wash.

Right beside it is Wilms's *Hull in the Crease*, a table-top hockey game cut in a third to show just the goal, a tiny Dominic Hasek down and out, and Brett Hull jumping up and down in the crease to celebrate the obviously illegal overtime goal that gave Dallas Stars the 1999 Stanley Cup over Hasek's Buffalo Sabres.

On a wall in another room is a huge photograph of a naked man covered only in outrageous tattoos, with a hurly stick in one hand. It is Roderick Buchanan's *Origins of Hockey* and little children are advised to avert their eyes as they pass.

Far more disturbing to visitors from Edmonton would be Diana Thorneycroft's *Martyrdom of the Great One*, which has Wayne Gretzky bloody and chained to a tree in his Oilers uniform, while wild lions and tigers sit around him, one chomping on a human limb.

There is also *Gretzky* by Ken Danby and *Gretzky* by Andy Warhol, and The Globe and Mail's own Anthony Jenkins has compelling portraits of Bobby Orr and Phil Esposito on display.

Curator Ray Cronin says he has no problem at all combining the hockey tournament with an art exhibit. After all, he says, “they share a common desire to excel, to challenge and, sometimes, to dazzle.”

They also both begin with a clean sheet and, when things go right, creativity happens.

Creativity such as Lisa Birke's *Great Canadian Hockey Quarry*, a Hieronymus Bosch-like work that show Canadian hockey players being strip mined in the wild and shipped off in boats.

Or *Hockey Fight in Canada*, a large work by Newfoundland artist Geoff Butler that shows a wild hockey brawl – gloves, helmets, sticks flying – while an armed United Nations peacekeeper stands by futilely blowing on a whistle.

It's not really a stretch to connect hockey and art. Many art historians, after all, believe there is a shinny game being played in the background of Pieter Bruegel's famous *Hunters in the Snow*, which the master painted in 1565. And Morley Callaghan always said hockey was Canada's very “own national drama.”

But, all the same, and just for good luck, Cronin had a lucky loonie buried in the floor of the Art Gallery, just as Edmonton icemaker Trent Evans put his Loonie for Luck under the ice at Salt Lake City in 2002.

There are 115 works by 61 artists in this gold-medal exhibit, but often the total seems like it should be more, as visiting hockey fans – a couple in this room sport an electric-blue Mohawk, ear studs, pink hair and full Finnish team regalia – can be mistaken for live exhibits.

There is also Joe Fafard's charming sculpture of Henri Richard sitting on the bench, a full-scale Zamboni, a wall of goalie masks that somehow convey expressions ranging from terror to sorrow, knitted equipment, a set of absurdly coloured goalie pads called, wonderfully, *Gump*, and a bronze Stanley Cup on top of an old washing machine that is called, appropriately, *Anything Else is a Compromise*.

The most impressive work is not even finished – and that is because artist-in-residence Graeme Patterson is still hard at work on a large, animated production celebrating Feb. 7, 1976: the night Darryl Sittler set an NHL record of 10 points in a single game, when his Toronto Maple Leafs defeated the Boston Bruins 11-4.

Sittler was on hand for yesterday's opening, ribbing Patterson, 27, a native of Saskatoon, for showing up in a Buffalo Sabres cap and talking about how excited he is to be involved in a work of art that doesn't end when the buzzer sounds.

“These pieces,” said an impressed Sittler, “will last forever.”

As perhaps his record of six goals and four assists in a single night will last forever. Gretzky couldn't manage it. Mario Lemieux couldn't. Sittler muses that perhaps local hero Sidney Crosby, or Russia's Alexander Ovechkin, will one day do it.

No one, of course, knows what the future will bring to either hockey or art.

Which brings us to the last stop on this compelling exhibition, which will tour out West later in the year.

It is a photograph of a skeleton sitting in a lawn chair at the side of the road.

Beside the skeleton, which is wearing a blue and white hockey jersey, is a sign saying: *Leaf Fan Waiting for Cup.*

A large stack of the photograph has been reproduced.

And below it, a hand printed sign: “Please Take One.”