

# THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

BY LAURENCE BUTET-ROCH

## KYLER ZELENY DOCUMENTS THE CANADIAN WEST

**Staring at a dozen kittens playing on the farm** in Mundare, Alberta, where he was raised, photographer and researcher Kyler Zeleny explains his attachment to the region and why he's committed to creating a visual document of the area.

The description of Kyler Zeleny's project *Crown Ditch and the Prairie Castle*—the second chapter of a trilogy on the Canadian Prairies—reads like a stream of consciousness poem. An excerpt says, “Wide horizons, big sky country, prairie oasis they called it, plains versus prairies, resources, grain, cattle, oil, potash, uranium, the real unsavorys, sun burnt faces, wind whipped cheeks, cowboys and farmers, generations of practical denim, Lucky Strike beer, strike anywhere matches, grain elevators, harvest sunset, canola, cash crop, futures market, railways, [...] the Western Chinese restaurant, ginger beef, grease, fully licensed, drink local, the hotel-bar, wide mainstreets, angle parking, few side streets, beer towns, rye towns, dry towns, hockey arenas, curling clubs and bonspiels...” While some will be familiar to all, others will mean little to those who are not familiar with Manitoba, Saskatchewan and/or Alberta.

The 29-year-old's photographs of the region work in much the same way. Scenes that appear deeply eloquent to locals may come across as either dreadfully mundane or wonderfully exotic to the unacquainted eye. Take images of streets that dead end on a field or a tailing, or the picture of a crocheted blanket hanging to dry. What could be more banal? Yet, at the same time, what could be more evocative of life in the Canadian West? In any case, they intrigue; which is exactly what Zeleny set out to do. “Photography gives me the ability to reach a number of people very quickly. It's an entry point to grab

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their attention. Then, hopefully, I can deliver more information and interest them in looking deeper into it,” he says.

The history of the Prairies is much more complex than what is taught, briefly, in school or how it is usually spoken about in the national media. During our hour-long conversation, I learned that in the thirties the region embraced socialist ideals, creating farming cooperatives; that it was arguably the site of the last land rush on the continent; that the influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Red Scare—the fear of Communists—in the fifties conflated to shift local politics towards conservatism; that it often feels alienated from

the rest of the country and resents Quebec, which, due to its (failed) bid for independence, garnered a lot of attention from the Federal government; and that grain elevators are often referred to as prairie castles or cathedrals. According to Zeleny, this heritage and the region's unique geography creates a sense of belonging that sets it apart from the country. In some ways, he speculates, there might be more affinities with the American West than with the Maritimes. “What is community? Is it a group of people that interact with each other? People that hail from or reside within a bounded territory? People that share common beliefs and values?”

Interested in exploring these questions and noticing the dearth of visual representation of the spaces west of Ontario, he has been building a photo trilogy that looks at different geographical constructs. *Out West* was made travelling through a hundred communities of fewer than a thousand people in the Canadian West, from Manitoba to British Columbia. *Crown Ditch and Prairie Castle* focuses on the Midwest, north and south of the border, namely Alberta, Saskatchewan and Montana. And



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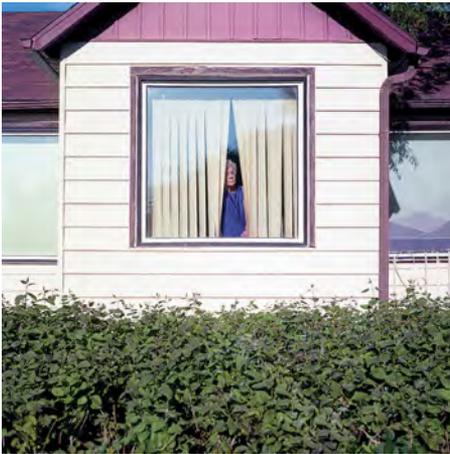
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his latest project, yet to be titled, zeros in on his hometown of Mundare. “Regionalisms do exist. In many ways, it might be more potent than any sense of national identity. Geography very much shapes the culture and economy of a place. The landscape of the Prairies was well-suited for farming, which, in turn, very much defined the community’s character,” he muses. Moreover, people are known to form strong, unconscious emotional bonds with the places they’re most familiar with. Having grown up in an area where the sky stretches endlessly, Zeleny remembers feeling claustrophobic driving in Ontario. He eventually figured out that it was because the trees

lining the road were obscuring the view on each side.

A lot of Zeleny’s fascination with the intersection of geography, identity and community comes from his personal journey, which has taken him in and out of his home province. After receiving a Bachelor of Arts in political science at the University of Alberta, he went to Goldsmiths’ College at the University of London in England for a master’s in photography and urban culture. He is currently completing a doctorate in communication and culture at Ryerson University in Toronto and goes back and forth between Ontario and home.

**From the series  
*Out West***

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Hence, when working in the Canadian West, he feels like he straddles the line between insider and outsider. On the one hand, he benefits from understanding the fabric of the community he documents and even shares lived memories with some of the members. On the other hand, he has gained some of the distance—geographically, emotionally and intellectually—needed to approach it with a more critical lens. His position also changes depending on where exactly he is within the Prairies. He’s more of an insider in Mundare than in one of the local First Nations communities. Still, no matter how involved within a given locale he is, Zeleny feels a profound sense of responsibility toward it. “I constantly think about the impact my work could have on the places I photograph. I want to create a body of work that will move the conversation in a positive way, but doing so might mean showing the community’s underbelly, which could be hurtful or have adverse effects. The most difficult thing is balancing the two,” he acknowledges. Consequently, he stresses that his work should not be seen as the definitive portrait of the Canadian West, but one of many potential narratives. In fact, he’s quick to point out the work of others on the region, including Orest Semchishen, George Webber and Sandra Semchuk, and encourages his peers to also shift their attention to the Prairies. The more eyes we have on this vast expanse of the country, the more nuanced its depiction will be. ■



**From the series  
*Crown Ditch and  
Prairie Castle***