

# A Montana sheep shearer's primal scream

By JOEL WEINSTEIN

Special writer, *The Oregonian*

**J**erry Iverson is a sheep shearer who works for four winter months in the desolate outback of south-central Montana. But his paintings resemble decaying tenement walls scrawled with the handwriting of inner city desperation.

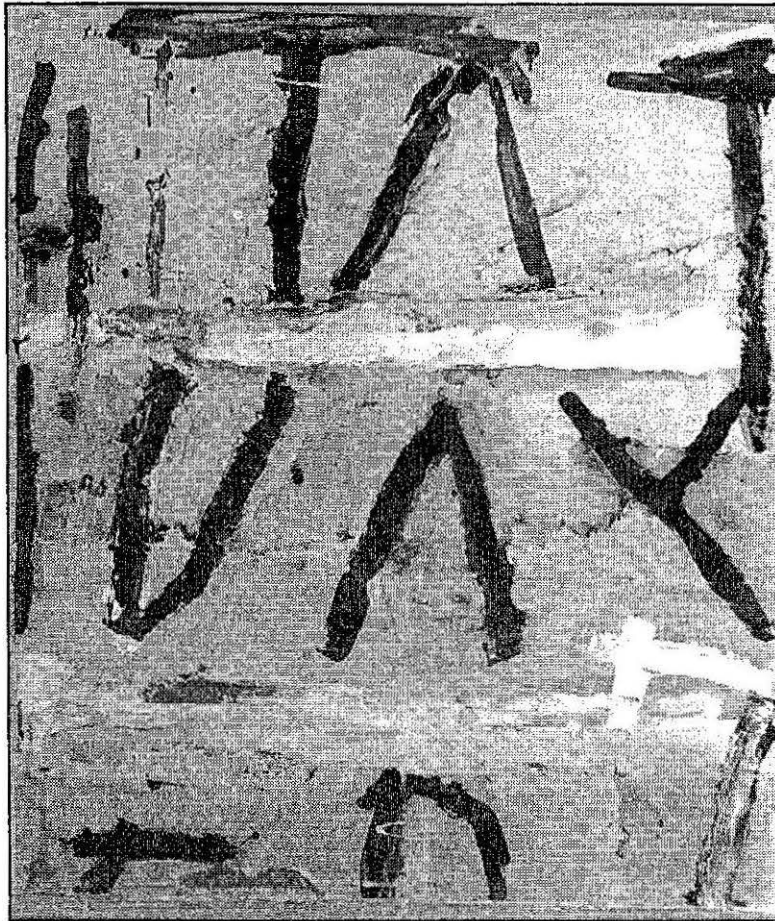
Yet the paintings — plaster and cloth thickly caked over cardboard, with sere, oozy surfaces that are stained and cracked and covered with fragments of an undecipherable language — are perfect metaphors for Iverson's rural experience.

Sheep shearing is difficult manual labor, he says — brutal is how he describes it — and he spends his winters in a cold, windswept landscape of misshapen brush such as juniper, chokecherry and sage.

The worst of it for Iverson, however, is the unremitting, bitter dialogue of the others who work with him, who sit around the dinner table at the ranch and hold forth with ideas about the world that he finds strange and distasteful. That black people are inferior to whites, for example. That the land is for mankind's exploitation. That animals ought to be killed, except for domestic ones. All of this is said in the crudest possible terms, and there can be no answering back.

In his mind Iverson disagrees, but he feels completely inarticulate before the forceful resentments that boil around him all season. And it's easy to read his paintings as testaments to the meagerness of language as it rides turbulent emotions: the fury of his adversaries or his own pent-up regrets.

For one thing, his paintings look like those essential symbols of separation, walls; decaying stands of plaster marked and gouged by generations of subliterate hands. The letter forms are dark, slashing at



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tacks or faint graphite scratches.

Sometimes only parts of letters are visible, or there are lines of crude handwriting with letters drawn backward or made into words that add up to nothing sensible. Some of the letters might be symbols from a long-dead or alien alphabet.

These barely readable, badly understood messages appear amid rubble: walls haphazardly under construction or inexorably in decay, with layers of peeling wallpaper and brown stains of unknown but dis-

tinctly unpleasant origins.

Seeing this work is like happening on a bad accident. It is a picture of the extinction of common sense.

Far from being inarticulate, Iverson has created a raw, caustic-smelling account of his baleful encounter with human nature set free in the territories. There, language erupts hotly and stings like sleet.

The near-coherence of Iverson's speech is touching, a clear insinuation of treachery and loss. His modest show tells more about the state of things in late 20th century Ameri-

## REVIEW

### Jerry Iverson: "Language Series"

**WHERE:** Pulliam Deffenbaugh Nugent Gallery, 522 N.W. 12th Ave.

**HOURS:** 11 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays

**CLOSING:** Aug. 28

**ADMISSION:** Free

ca than all the sneering, self-absorbed, polemical racket that was written plainly on the walls of the Whitney Museum during the New York museum's recent biennial.

But Iverson's observations and his connections to the world are not simply reactionary. He lives far from the urban centers where galleries are, and he would be pathological indeed if his paintings were only about the rueful disappointments of life among the sheep.

There is a lot about that life he likes: the physicality of the labor, the tactile pleasure of working with a natural fiber in a world overrun

with synthetics, learning to be a survivor in barren surroundings.

If at first his paintings all look like sad texts of America's millennium, they also look like something else entirely. In "Language Series No. 82," for example, variously arranged sections of corrugated cardboard resemble adjacent plowed winter fields; the brown stains could be thawing earth showing through the snow; and the bands of black, the trails of a melting glacier or incursions of suburban asphalt.

Beneath the cindery ribbons of writing in some of these generally gray works are signs of bright greens, purples and reds, like afterimages of the vivid origins of thought or incendiary flashes of memory.

Iverson's predilection to slap layers of goo, stretches of cheesecloth, scraps of paper and pieces of tape over every fissure and crack of his constructions gives the "Language Series" a creamy, agile voice. Abandoned, excessive, it is a fine instrument for the strange conundrums of the human psyche, the austere beauties of the landscape, the sustaining difficulties of labor, and the artist's place in this world.