

paint person

IN A LECTURE IN THE MID-1960s at the New York Studio School titled “Faith, Hope and Impossibility,” the painter Philip Guston spoke about two crucial, oppositional artists who had preoccupied him above all others: Piero della Francesca and Rembrandt. Piero represented the “ideal painter,” an abstractionist searching for absolutes, his paintings like games of perfect strategy. With Rembrandt, however, according to Guston, the plane of art is removed altogether, giving us “a real person—a substitute, a golem.” Primeval like Genesis, coloured dirt becomes something alive. The paint is the thing and the thing is paint. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Rembrandt’s portraits, where facial features and paint are mysteriously fused in what the critic James Elkins calls alchemy.

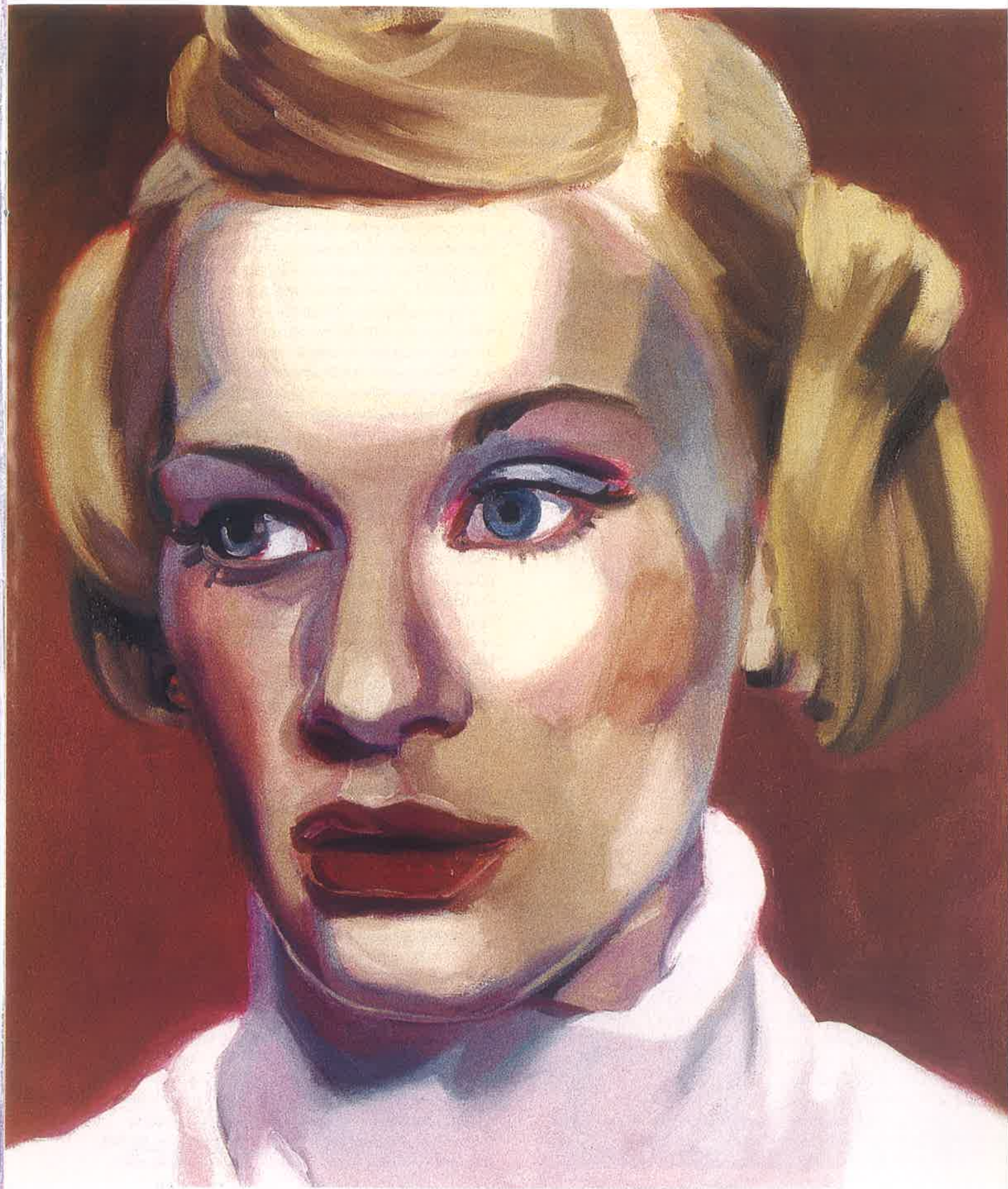
While comparisons to Rembrandt are perhaps premature, Janet Werner’s new portraits, exhibited at the Ottawa Art Gallery under the romantic title “Since first I cast eyes on you,” possess

Since the mid-1990s, **Janet Werner** has renewed the idea of the portrait by painting her way into the compelling complexities of faces and personalities

by David Elliott

a high-powered naturalism in which the miracle transfer of paint into person and person into paint predominates. Lips, eyebrows, spiked or braided hair, cheekbones, Adam’s apples, jaws, lashes and saliva—all are confections of paint, and yet unnervingly convincing. I found myself pivoting in front of the work. Backing off to see the whole and then moving in for a closer look. From a distance, each canvas has a straightforward, almost banal presence, not unlike the trendy magazine photos that provided source material for the work. Colours are striking enough, heads and shoulders are massed in the tweaked classicism of our mainstream image culture. Greek gone Hollywood. Similarly, the sexual magnetism inherent in these young specimens is so commonplace that we initially take it for granted.

The stakes are raised when we start to scrutinize how they are painted. Reasons to linger are certainly best appreciated at close range, where the canvases ignite both as art object and as psychosexual fetish. Werner’s deftness with light and shadow, the way her brush caresses and pokes around the mouth, the patina of warm tones on the ear—take your pick—something here should leave you aroused as both human animal and connoisseur, unless you’re blind, prudish or both. In *Pretty boy*,



It is precisely this kind of laconic high note that is central to Werner's work



Alien 1997 Oil on canvas 50.8 x 45.7 cm Photo Judy Bowyer

the initial icy turquoise stroke describing the right side of the face stands there with that "I was right the first time" quality that painters give their eye-teeth for. The knockouts in the show happen to be the largest works, where broad, muscular paint-handling remains acute without seeming fussy. The cascading hair in *Sweetie*, the cosmetic overkill on the face of *Baby* and the dark beauty marks in *Girl with tongue out* are particularly wicked displays. Touch is a funny thing in art, particularly in painting, where it is quite literal. When ticks and twitches are applied to the human face, as they are here, the animation can be uncanny.

That the strength of these paintings should be in the brush work is, oddly enough, a novelty these days. Painting, the famously hot medium, has been stuck in the cool zone for some time, its visceral attack filtered by photography, film and now the cut-and-paste of postmodernism. Perhaps there is an unspoken penance being performed for the medium's past excesses, be they second-rate Abstract Expressionism or the palette-knife impastos at the shopping mall.

When I congratulate Werner on the virtuosity of her new paintings, telling her they remind me of John Singer Sargent's great society portraits, she acts embarrassed, like it's some kind

of sin to paint like this. The fact that I'm clearly jealous probably further complicates the situation. She acknowledges that she has, up until now, resisted a full embrace of her ability to paint from observation or photos, because she was afraid that in focusing on the visible, she would lose something of the invisible. I understand what she means, but I'm not sure I agree.

The inside/outside argument is central to modernism, and is best personified by Picasso, who painted the exterior of things so well by age 14 that he spent the rest of his life turning inside out. The implication is that we must bypass surface appearance to get to the deeper, more soulful heart of the matter. There is some truth to this, immediately apparent in the clairvoyance of children's drawings, among other things, but even the modernists, obsessed as they were by masks, realized that the relationship between inside and outside is by nature symbiotic and insoluble.

The revelation in the Ottawa portraits that Werner can fashion a handsome exterior in no way hamstrings her from going deep or even messing up if she wants to. It just puts her in the enviable position of potentially having her cake and eating it too. And while these new paintings might at first seem like a departure for the artist, they are simply a further development in her ongoing fascination with interpersonal relations. How do we approach each other? What do we really know about someone else? How much can we share? The jury is still out on these questions, and the artist's choice of good-looking models manages to keep the cipher-like continence of her earlier invented characters intact.

Werner claims to have stumbled into a career as a painter. After studying liberal arts at the University of Toronto, she kept herself occupied "waitressing and being depressed," as she puts it, while enjoying part-time drawing classes on the side. Eventually her sister convinced her to apply to art school. She submitted sketches to an inter-university portfolio day at CalArts, where her early efforts were impressive enough to attract the interest of a number of schools. Leery of the open-ended curriculum offered by many art schools, she decided to accept a scholarship from the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, well known for its traditional academic grounding. What followed were four years of painting from observation, where Werner obviously developed the chops so evident in the new work.

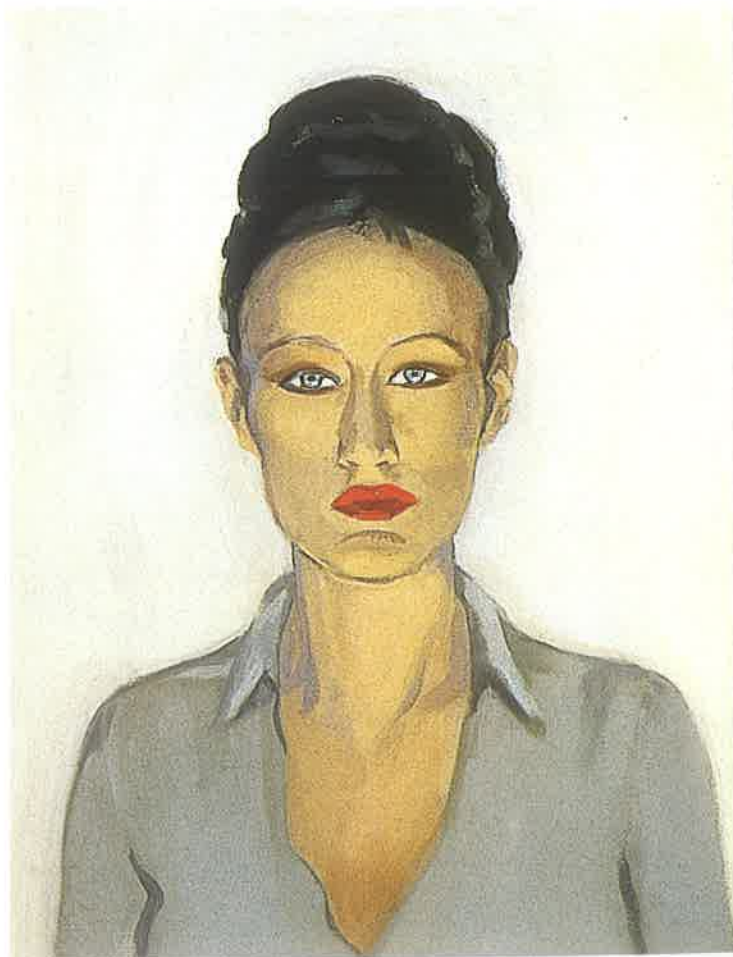
During Werner's MFA at Yale, the carefully constructed craft had already begun to loosen into playful fields of quasi-abstract eruptions, the kind of imagery that Peter Schjeldahl refers to as "being about 'being about.'" Returning to Canada after grad school, moving to Saskatoon to teach at the University of Saskatchewan from 1987 to 1999 and now newly settled in Montreal, Werner has been busy. Often with two different touring shows on the road at the same time, she has managed more than 20 solo or two-person exhibitions in the

past ten years. Her work is well documented in a series of exhibition catalogues with intriguing titles that in themselves tell the story of her development: *Rehearsing the World*, *Reflections on Language and the Appearance of Things*, *Figures and Fields*, *Scat*, *Slow Pictures*, *Listen*, *Lucky*, *Trust*, *Trance* and *Beautiful Losers*. The early paintings, as you might have guessed, treat painting like grammar. Multiple small panels carefully deployed on the wall experiment with poetic syntax, creating visual narratives rooted in chance, rupture and half-spoken truths. *Scat*, shown at Mercer Union in 1993, is a good example of this approach, with supports that vary from rectangles to ovals and imagery that combines vaguely Tantric pools and spirals with nursery-rhyme fragments of words and stylized characters. Light and lyrical, it is spiced with an underlying angst.

Later, during a 1995 stint at the Canada Council's Paris studio, Werner created a series of gouache drawings; faces emerge from this lively quagmire like visual puns similar to the fruit and vegetable visages of Arcimboldo or Dalí's *Mae West*. Werner's subject matter, which even in the most oblique works could still be understood as having to do with human relationships (especially boy/girl stuff), also begins to be more overt, with cartoon-like figures speaking to each other in captions such as "Will you be coming back?" or "Okay, I'll try." Courtship and flirtation are the order of the day, but one senses estrangement more than a roll in the hay.

By 1997, Werner is focusing on the portrait. The early ones are invented and full of feigned awkwardness, like eyes and mouths that can't seem to decide whether they should be oval or rectangular, or noses where the attempted 3-D illusion is overlaid with a simplistic circle or loop. The snout in *Alien* becomes a terrible hybrid of Karl Malden and Miss Piggy, while a woman struggles for supremacy with a mutt's jowl in *Dogface*. Innocence and humour keep the paintings and the characters buoyant, while their idiosyncrasies and hobbled nature lend them poignancy.

The more Werner paints them, the more the invented people begin to settle down, becoming stable enough to be believable and yet still remaining products more of the mind than of the world. A generic aspect still haunts them, keeping them mostly mute and stunted, so it's heartening to see certain ones break out of the mould. You end up rooting for them. What sets them apart is usually something minor; in *Lashes* it begins with a shock of purplish-grey hair that separates from the coiffure. But it's



ABOVE: *Pink boy* 1997 Oil on canvas 1.67 x 1.95 m
Photo Judy Bowyer Courtesy Robert Birch Gallery

BOTTOM: *Mink* 2000 Oil on canvas 78.7 x 60.9 cm
Photo Richard Max Tremblay Courtesy Robert Birch Gallery



Baby 2001 Oil on canvas 1.65 x 1.39 m Photo Richard Max Tremblay

the brush-stroke shadow the hair casts on the woman's forehead that really comes alive. It is precisely this kind of laconic high note that is central to Werner's work, making us think we're in touch with something important, something real.

Looking at the work chronologically, it is hard not to see Werner's painting trajectory in Darwinian terms. A personal genetic code of latent shapes morphs into awkward mongrels with names like *Rubber lips*, who in turn grow into shiny perfect people like *Mink*. Comparing Werner's early invented portraits with the new ones, I am reminded of David Hockney's *Secret Knowledge* and his thesis on how optics allowed the lumpen heads of Duccio and Giotto to give way to the accomplished air of Holbein and Velázquez.

Yet we all know better than to assume that there is progress, let alone superiority, in art or life. In Kurt Vonnegut's *Galápagos*, humans revert to having beaks and flippers because they are happier and healthier, ergo more intelligent and more evolved, in that particular stage of development. Similarly, Werner's creations search for their incarnations through instinct, trial and error.

As it stands now, Janet Werner has already made a substantial body of work, with each successive step revealing something more about her as a painter and more about ourselves and our funny relationships to each other. The show in Ottawa this past winter was modest in scale, but with much to like and admire. Half of the portraits in the show were so good they were scary, and yet for the artist they are the beginning rather than the end of something. At the time of this writing, Werner is already pursuing a new spin on her glamorous creations, attempting six separate portraits from a single magazine photo source. She refers to the anonymous girl as Michelle because she embodies the bland, pretty good looks that she associates with the name. As Werner plays with different takes on the same frozen features, you realize that the identity and personality of each one hinges on some small permutation in the paint. A smudge, the gentle tapering of the brush, a slight change of angle or hue can turn a babysitter into a supermodel or push an adolescent towards middle age. Anyone who has tried their hand at painting knows how hard it is to make something stick or to repeat something that worked previously, and, conversely, how wonderful it can be when some unconscious gesture creates something you could not have hoped for.

In the end, what makes Werner's enterprise special is the way she demonstrates that paint, with its elasticity and mutability, is still perhaps the perfect medium for expressing the mobility of the human psyche. Its inherent silence allows us an open-ended stare into the mirror. Personally, I'm already looking forward to the Janet Werner retrospective when *Dogface*, (*dad?*), *Rubber lips*, *Blondie* and *Pretty boy* finally turn up in the same room. Now that's what I call a party! ■