



top: Janet Werner, *Untitled (Floating)*, 2005, oil on canvas. Images courtesy Paul Kuhn Gallery, Calgary, and birch libralato, Toronto.

below: Janet Werner, *Girl with Red Shirt*, 2005, oil on canvas, 80 x 66".

## VISUAL ART

### Janet Werner

James Campbell

The idiosyncratically atonal and hypnotically tranquil paintings Winnipeg-born, Montreal-based artist Janet Werner exhibited demonstrated once again that she has been resolutely working towards investing her portraiture with a resilient phenomenology of mood. These works are eloquent in their silences. Expression and palette set their mood swings in motion, and a measure of abjection, a sad truth of our lived experience, can be felt just underneath many of their reduced and beautifully painted surfaces.

This examination of mood marks Werner's highly unusual and raw work of the last five years. While they draw upon a wide pool of eclectic sources for their

subjects, from Royal Doulton figurines and miniatures to fashion magazine photographs and dolls, Werner's portraits in this exhibition are still invented personae. Werner is a superb, transformative painter at the top of her form. She takes her subjects from other contexts and makes them entirely her own. The faces are intentionally generic. Their expressions—another matter. More allusive than recognizable, her portraits draw us effortlessly into an auratic web of pure and often haunting affect or, say better, mood. Paradoxically, the somewhat naïve rendering of her figuration only serves to enhance the elasticity and power of that web.

The new work is moodier than ever. Whether euphoric or dysphoric, the moodiness she imbues in her figures and their surrounds makes them far from mute. For example, in a work like *The little ankleboots knock the hooves*, 2004, the artist seems to be commenting on desire, gender and the construction of feminine identity. The juxtapositions in the painting and its contrasting palette, the large expanses of paint, even its quirky but revealing title, contribute to the potency of its prevailing mood and draw us in. Werner turns the portraiture table on her viewers, seducing us into seeing ourselves.

The moods of the portraits are certainly volatile when appraised as a group, running the gamut from happy carnal desire to empty sadness. The use of the peephole device is interesting, reminiscent of old tv shows that, upon

concluding, periscoped down to a small circle and then a black hole, somehow reminding us it was all a dream. As the aperture of our purview winnowed down, the drama returned to an imaginary world experienced once a week and coveted accordingly. The periscoping effect here is heightened by the fact that some paintings seem stratified, and tremulous ghosts of their previous selves can be glimpsed just underneath.

As I walked from portrait to portrait, I thought of composer Kyle Gann's *Long Night*, his inef-fable music for three pianos that play alternately in synch and independently. (I thought of La Monte Young, too.) Interestingly, Gann was inspired by the philosopher Martin Heidegger, especially his phenomenology of moods. The composer has spoken eloquently of striving for a piece that would constitute a cascading series of moods, but without any linear, parallel connectedness, and in *Long Night*, with its three piano lines lapping at us like gentle sonic waves, endlessly approaching and receding, he certainly succeeded. How akin to Werner's exhibition Gann's composition is and pertinent to what she achieves in her decidedly postmodern or anti-modern art of portraiture.

The exhibition was installed with rare finesse by curator Renee Baert and the artist to suggest a patterned grid of reveries, the phenomenal delicacy of which caught us up in the artist's overwhelmingly curious thought world. The sum of the paintings generated an overall ambient

surround somehow greater than their individual personae, and thus our lingering transit throughout the space marked off the volume as one intimately lived.

Moving among paintings like *Girl with Red Shirt* (her Giotto-blue, wide open eyes looking right through us), *Untitled (Floating)* and *Skaters* was like loading blanks. Indeed, it meant traversing a metaphoric skating rink much like the couple depicted in the latter, and sometimes the ice underfoot felt thin and cracking, as the sheer strangeness, pathos and pert melancholy of the portraits seeped out. Still, we were transported to all manner of imaginary, glamorous and not so glamorous worlds.

Werner, like Gann and Heidegger, disabuses us of the notion that the personality is somehow a linear construct, a unified consciousness. Collating the moods evoked in the exhibition meant gathering up ruptures and non-logical transitions between images and sundry states of mind and sampling their moods like heady glasses of Beaujolais. The exhibition as a whole constituted an atonal environmental volume (all pitches carried equal importance therein) made up of, and underscored by, overlapping discontinuities. Heidegger argued in *Being and Time* that "mood"—and this is a truth the painter Janet Werner knows well—understands further than cognition can ever hope to reach. ■

*"Janet Werner" was on exhibition at the Liane and Danny Taran Gallery of the Saidye Bronfman Centre from June 24 to August 21, 2005.*

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## VISUAL ART

### Arnaud Maggs

Daniel Baird

One of the distinctive features of 18th- and 19th-century natural scientists was the elegance and searching precision of their prose. Charles Darwin and his brilliant opponent Louis Agassiz, who was an intimate of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, were both accomplished and influential stylists in their own right. The reason why this should be so is fairly obvious: prior to photography, much less

the subtle technologies of more recent advent, the documentation of observation required either hauling stuffed birds, dried plants and stones back from the bush to places like the Natural History Museum or the Royal Ontario Museum, or else providing detailed descriptions. And description demands a rich, versatile vocabulary.

Arnaud Maggs's new body of work, entitled "Werner's Nomenclature of Colours," a portion of which is currently on view at the Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto, consists of 13 colour photographs of plates from the 1821 book *Werner's Nomenclature of Colours*, as arranged so as to render it highly useful to the arts and sciences. Substantially enlarged, photographed so that the bent spine of the book is visible and mounted on aluminum, *Werner's Nomenclature of Colours* are essentially charts organized according to general colour terms, in which the specific hue appears on the left and is followed by a colour sample and instances in the animal, vegetal and mineral worlds in which the colour occurs. We discover, for instance, that "Snow White" is found in the

Arnaud Maggs, *Werner's Nomenclature of Colours*, 2005, edition of 3, colour photograph mounted on aluminum, 113 x 84 cm each, framed. Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.

