



JANET WERNER *Star Bunny* 2006
Oil on canvas 2.08 x 1.67 m

dental manikin and weather-balloon fabric. Resting at ankle level, the rubber head, anchored to a yellow disk by a studded leather strap, slowly inhales and exhales a large bubble that fills with air pumped from overhead.

While humorous, *Gödel-Gödel* radiates an uncomfortable itch. Western art is filled with decapitated heads, and Wise's addition to this iconography embodies Max Weber's theory of the condition of disenchantment that develops when intellectual and phenomenological perception are severed from one another. *Gödel-Gödel* represents the threat of technological ambition, the endless components and programs that technology elaborates for its survival and dominance—to the detriment of humanity, the community and nature.

The artist's theme comes full circle in *ratgnaw*, which resulted from Wise's discovery of a partially chewed potato on the kitchen floor of his cottage. The sculpture consists of a life-size cast-bronze potato

lying on a square section of linoleum flooring cantilevered from the gallery wall. Encouraged to pick up the bronze, the viewer discovers its weight, and wonders—enchanted—about the diligence of a rat struggling to move a potato across a kitchen. BRIAN GRISON

Janet Werner

BIRCH LIBRALATO, TORONTO

In her well-known portrait paintings, Janet Werner seems fascinated with what George Eliot, in *Daniel Deronda*, calls pettishness: a peevish brattiness often characteristic of pretty, spoiled girls and (in a possible etymological connection) their pets—cats and toy dogs. Pettishness may be officially frowned upon, but it persists as a pop-cultural trope in exaggeratedly feminine products like accessories, tabloid celebrities and candy-coloured films. (Sofia Coppola's recent film *Marie Antoinette* is an unabashed ode to pettishness.)

Werner's new show, "Up here in heaven," goes to great lengths to explain the allure and tenacity of pettishness. In her boldest new paintings—large-format space scenes depicting supernovas and nebulae mingling with cameos, bunnies, chihuahuas and, startlingly, what looks to be Britney Spears's face—one finds a meditation on the very nature of the beautiful, especially in the Kantian-Burkean sense. Here, cultivated prettiness and cuteness—in a seeming parody of Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*—become parts of a sublime, star-born life force. Which, of course, they are: hungry doe eyes and expressive, pouty lips are elemental; they issue forth implicit demands to be nurtured, and are thus as vital to evolutionary success as sharp teeth or muscular hind legs.

Werner's style is, accordingly, deliberate and chunky: a messy rendering of Paris Hilton is not a lampoon, but a quasi-expressionist attempt to capture the cosmic nothingness in her eyes. *Prairies* is a masterful study in pink: the figure's transcendent immersion in this colour, and Werner's command of it, prove that pink can indeed be a wild and pre-eminent thing. The figure's pink T-shirt (dotted with leopard print, of course) and lipstick, as well as the strange hue of her right ear, seem of a piece with the pink of the setting sun behind her, an affinity that augments her strength like blush on an elegant, angular cheekbone.

Similarly, *Eclipse* and *Girl on cliff* put overtly decorated women in nature and demonstrate how their forms mimic those of trees, flowers and rocks. Yet Werner's women are also alien to their grey-and-brown milieu; the viewer latches on to them readily, desperately, greedily. One thinks of Baudelaire, who in "The Painter of Modern Life" praises this paradox, wherein beauty, spurning bland nature, must turn to decoration for its very survival, in order to "conquer hearts and rivet attention." In this way, Werner's art becomes curiously, brilliantly indistinguishable from the heavenly creatures she paints. DAVID BALZER

FOR MORE REVIEWS SEE www.canadianart.ca