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Lost in Luke Painter's petrified forest

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Luke Painter at LE Gallery *Until May 27, 1183 Dundas St. W., Toronto; le-gallery.ca*

Where to begin with mid-career artist/teacher Luke Painter's alarming ink-on-paper wonders?

With his abundant inter-genre references, based on an encyclopedic knowledge of ornament and architecture history, or with the insanity-inspiring level of sheer physical labour and detail obsession evident in each drawing, or with Painter's advanced use of 3-D software to map out his intricate dreamscapes?

Any one of these factors is worth a monograph, but I prefer a more primal approach – to acknowledge that, yes, Painter's work is labour-intensive and meta-art smart, but more importantly acknowledges the maximum kick-to-the-head impact of his drawings. Art that makes you feel smart is one thing, and a fine thing, but art that causes a gut reaction is another, very much another. Call me emotional.

Beginning with hair-thin applications of clean, black India ink, Painter draws towers, mansions, petrified forests and manicured hedges in crisp, but never cold, animated outlines. Then he fills in the outlines with coloured inks, inks that create depth but remain steadfastly illustrative, even hard, avoiding any hint of painting, of a brush stroke or liquidity.

Some find Painter's process results in a kind of coldness, a deathly sterility, but I find the tension in Painter's drawings, the anxiety over precision and texture control, moving and more

than a little nerve-wracking – precisely because the works do not signal an immediate emotional subtext.

Unless, that is, you approach a Painter work as one sweeping expression/enacting of control and performance neuroses (especially in this new exhibition, which features both massive and pocket-sized works, all packed to the gills with information). Then, the details and detailing very soon overwhelm and you find yourself in the middle of a horror-vacui panic attack.

From there, you begin to see duels being fought on the paper. The desire to create perfect replicas (or at least perfectly and consistently stylized replicas) of well-known architectural forms vs. the desire to create alienated, post-Surreal dreamscapes, impossible places. The aforementioned horror vacui, a.k.a. the fear of empty space, vs. a kind of dark resignation, generated and cued by the mountain of black, delineating ink, that said space can never be filled, that there is always room for one more line. The always-fraught stylistic balancing act between magic realism, with its fondness for the nightmarish, and twee whimsicality. And, above all, a push-pull between the minute and the epic (especially evident in Painter's large works).

Underneath all Painter's tight, measured and flawless surfaces, messy battles rumble.

Adi Nes, Koffler Off-Site at Olga Korper Gallery *Until June 2, 17 Morrow Ave., Toronto;*
kofflerarts.org

I am of two minds about the work of Israeli photographer Adi Nes. Part of me finds his carefully staged, highly theatrical photographs engagingly performative and an undiluted pleasure to look at (the impossibly beautiful actors/performers and soldiers he employs as models don't hurt either).

The other half of me parses out the amount of artificiality purposely generated in the works and finds it ultimately not nearly as dramatic as it wants to be – sometimes, it feels like Nes is loading his stage with too many props, prop-like actors and pretty gels. For each moment of sheer gorgeousness, there are several more moments of potted melodrama. Nes needs a dramaturge.

Take, for instance, his recreation of *The Last Supper*. Instead of actors dressed in biblical costume, Nes uses Israeli soldiers, dressed in green fatigues. Of course, one's first reaction is to consider the socio-political context. Israel is nothing if not a loaded place, and its role in the world nothing if not controversial. To recontextualize a pivotal moment in the Christ narrative by employing Israeli soldiers is a bold, clever, brassy stunt.

But is it anything more than a Benetton ad-style shock image? Does the photograph resonate after the gasp is inhaled?

Given that Nes is famous for his fussy, Hitchcockian approach to de-naturalized image staging, shouldn't this controversial image have had a bit more care in its use of, for instance, props (the meal, such as it is, and the serving vessels, are decidedly underwhelming, even cheap-looking). And why do some of the soldiers appear to be in on the acting game while others do not?

It's as if Nes wants it both ways: highly controlled imagery with a fashion-magazine glamour (and gloss) but also imagery that seems, in its kineticism, to be almost journalistic, found or accidental.

Case in point: Nes's staging of Old Testament stories as narratives of contemporary Jerusalem and inner-city poverty. They fooled me on first glance. I thought the destitute folks populating these images were perhaps Palestinians in the occupied territories, actual poor people going about their unhappy lives. I read the photographs as shaming political artifacts. Turns out the people in the photos are all hired performers, some of them well-known Jerusalemites.

Ouch. But, is Nes giving us a series of valuable jolts or of merely calculated, and ultimately therefore palatable, risks?

I am certainly not arguing that an artist has an obligation to create clear or immediately readable images. The best thing about Nes's work is how many cryptic layers are in play. But when one spends more time unpacking the various enfolded texts in a work than actually enjoying the work (granted, such study is how many people enjoy art, scholars and civilians alike), I figure the spectacle has overwhelmed the story. The costumes, lights, pretty faces and elaborate makeup are sucking all the oxygen out of the theatre.

Looking at a Nes photograph is akin to watching Cirque Du Soleil do *Hamlet*. You appreciate the elaborate effort, and are perhaps enthralled by Ophelia's underwater ballet, but by the end you still aren't sure what the unhappy prince is so worked up about.

IN OTHER VENUES

Eamon Mac Mahon and Jim Verburg at Circuit Gallery/Gallery 345 *Until May 26, 345 Sorauren Ave., Toronto; gallery345.com*

Mac Mahon's photographs of desolate places are neatly in synch with Verburg's photo-manipulations representing the less inhabited corners of the human mind. Both sets of works

take the long, spiritual view, literally and figuratively.

Heather Benning at Telephone Booth Gallery *Until June 9, 3148 Dundas St. W., Toronto;*
telephoneboothgallery.ca

Here's fun: Benning transformed an abandoned Manitoba farmhouse into a giant dollhouse, complete with cut-away walls and sweetly decorated rooms. The photographic documents from this project are simultaneously adorable and creepy.

Melissa Doherty at Edward Day Gallery *Until May 26, 952 Queen St. W., Toronto;*
edwarddaygallery.com

Hyper-realist arborist Doherty paints trees as if they were specimens under microscopes. You can hear the wind whistling between the leaves.

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