

“60 Painters” shows off Toronto’s dynamic artists

It is what it says: “60 Painters,” an exhibition of squarely five-dozen Toronto (and at least tangentially Toronto-connected) artists beholden to the brush and canvas. And if that sounds like a lot in this era of photography, video, performance and conceptual whateverness, consider the task faced by curator Scott Sawtell.

**By: Murray Whyte** Visual arts, Published on Fri May 25 2012

It is what it says: “60 Painters,” an exhibition of squarely five-dozen Toronto (and at least tangentially Toronto-connected) artists beholden to the brush and canvas. And if that sounds like a lot in this era of photography, video, performance and conceptual whateverness, consider the task faced by curator Scott Sawtell.

“My original list was more like ‘200 Painters,’ ” says Sawtell, who teaches painting at Brock University and the OCAD University, and happens to be one of the 60. “The Toronto painting community is just so strong, and really seems to be growing.”

This is no small statement.

By the '90s, as the realm of “serious” art had become dense and exclusive in its strict adherence to conceptualism, painting, at least as a practice that seemed fresh and alive, had come to be seen more as quaint anachronism than vital and contemporary.

Much has changed in the past decade, though. Welcome convergence between media has opened the door wide again to painters, and a breadth of young, rigorously gifted artists have taken up the cause in surprisingly fresh, unique ways.

“60 Painters” accomplishes the welcome task of drawing a clear line from an older generation of established painters and some of the young artists striking their own, new paths with the old form.

At Humber College’s Art and Media Studios in South Etobicoke, where Sawtell found the expanse of vacant space he needed between spring and summer sessions — more on that later — he puts major figures like Denyse Thomasos next to 2007 OCAD graduate Stanzie Tooth, and the pairing, of Thomasos’ kinetic layering of colourfully indistinct architectural form next to Tooth’s carefully dabbed, tricolor abstraction, simply sings. A broken ship’s hull crumpled in a grip of ice by young painter Bogdan Luca sits in

cryptic opposition across a black-walled room from senior artist Wanda Koop's eerie, angular crimson landscape, fitted with twin searing floodlights. Shelly Adler's gorgeously elegant, signature large-scale portraiture shares a corner with the aggressively thick, gorily oil-laden work of up-and-comer Kim Dorland.

Sawtell made no distinctions for age, style, experience or reputation. Alongside such relative giants as David Urban, Will Gorlitz Harold Klunder and John Kissick, not to mention Koop and Thomasos, lesser-known artists like Heather Graham get their due. Graham in particular shines with a remarkably indistinct portrait in white and pale greys that's both riveting and barely there.

"I was just trying to show a breadth, both of work but of established and up-and-coming," Sawtell says. "My hope was to give an idea of new possibilities." What Sawtell accomplishes, though, is a reinvigoration of the simple truth that endless possibilities persist in a form that's been left for dead more times than anyone can count. Whether in the early part of the 20th century, by photography and the age of mechanical reproduction or Dadaism's ready-mades — signed urinals, fur-lined teacups — or later on, when the wake of 1950s first-generation abstraction was meant to signal the form's end (the nails in the coffin being the advent of minimalism and conceptualism in the '60s), painting has ebbed and flowed, but never stilled.

If anything, its various suppressions have allowed painting to be liberated, time and again, in exuberantly non-prescriptive ways. Maybe partly as a result, "60 Painters" has a charming humility. In the Humber space, Sawtell spreads his exhibition through classrooms and along hallways lined with student lockers, occasionally splashing out into large rooms used during academic session as black-walled lecture halls and performance theatres. The idiosyncrasies of the venue supply ad-hoc moments of real wonder — as in one dark studio space where a striking, gestural work by Michael Davidson (called, in happily-appropriate accident, "Liberation") looms above the others, hung on the studio's stage.

Through the warren of hallways, Sawtell leaves gold coins (Tristram Lansdowne's *Typis Montis Ventris*, a dizzying watercolour of a fractured volcano spewing pink froth, is one of these) leading, eventually, to "60 Painters'" beating heart: Humber's film studio, where soaring ceilings fitted with a grid of light supports lend the

works here an air of post-industrial grandeur (Adler's piece, *Nicki*, a portrait of a young woman with glasses, lands in front of the film studio's green screen, providing one of those magical ad hoc moments). Here, a dizzying abstract by Melanie Authier shares the wall with the conceptual play of Daniel Borins and Jennifer Marman; a dark figure thick with texture by John Brown sits close by, then Dorland, Adler, Thomasos and Tooth.

Every room seems to contain its own universe of breadth, anchored, of course, by its medium. Sawtell's show is a microcosm of the medium's remarkable adaptability, though he says he never intended it as such. "There's no statement here," he says. "I've seen a lot more painting around in the last four or five years, for sure, but I wasn't really looking at hierarchies with this. If there's a statement, it's that there are a lot of amazing painters here, and let's celebrate that."

*On Saturday May 26, "60 Painters" is holding a day-long symposium on painting, with lectures and panel discussions involving several of the exhibiting artists. For more information, please see <http://60painters.com/>. The exhibition continues at Humber College's Art and Media Studios, 300 Birmingham Street, Etobicoke.*