

## Do look back - in order to move forward

Art Mûr's Spitting Image exhibition reveals 11 artists confronting memory to create new images

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Spitting Image is a theme show comprising work by 11 contemporary artists, organized at Art Mûr by gallery directors Rhéal Olivier Lanthier and François St. Jacques.

In spite of the show's title though, there's a disquieting sense of dryness and calm, sometimes verging on coma, in many of the works, all relatively figurative and all more or less based on human anatomy. It's to be noted that the artists in this show are actually from the "stable" of Toronto's Edward Day Gallery, which is currently featuring works from Art Mûr, a St. Hubert St. storefront space that has become one of Montreal's most exciting venues.

Some of the artists, such as Heather Graham, do portraits that express doubt as to the sitters' inner being. In the work *Then*, for instance, dark oil strategically smudged onto textured white expanses coalesces into faces, one per canvas, that seem to have been blown, like dust, onto their formats.

Graham's faces, enlarged and almost entirely cropped along their edges, signal a kind of transience, not exactly the newest of artists' preoccupations, but, nevertheless, given some nice emotional nuances by Graham. Despite their dominance of the paper surface, Graham's people seem painfully remote, just the shadow of a memory of a thought.

However, in Sophie Jodoin's black-and-white drawings, the subjects, "little people", appear to emerge from the paper, but never to break free of it.

Nor, given their physical proportions, will they ever become poster people for classical Greek statues. Yet, the figures that stare back at us from Jodoin's *Diary of K* series, depicted head to toe, seem to offer themselves up to us, whether or not we instantly embrace them or just put them out of our thoughts.

Also focusing on anatomies that don't easily fit current beauty standards is artist Catherine Heard in her *Errata* sculpture series. One such work, made of waxed plaster and bluntly titled *Four Eyes*, is a bust perhaps inspired by some medical anthology of dramatic human anomalies. Depicted are two heads with semi-conjoined faces. The sculpture itself, which looks as though carved in marble, gives added meaning to the word "mute." Never will we establish real contact with these people.

Nor will we know how to relate to the pretty woman in John Oswald's catchy, computer-assisted digital image, *After Rembrandt*. While neatly catching our gaze with her big brown eyes, the woman in the centre of this work changes before our very eyes. As we stroll past, her complexion makes not-too-subtle transformations, and certain bits of jewellery either appear or vanish.

Brought to mind is the sly technical wizardry animating a Jezebel-type robot in Fritz Lang's 1927 movie, *Metropolis*. In a sense, Oswald's woman, closely matched with a woman in a Rembrandt portrait, comes "alive," her digital transformations somehow tuned to the viewer's own movements while contemplating the work.

Yet, and this is perhaps a major reverse triumph, the superimposing of a current face on another, as already filtered through Rembrandt's painterly sensibility, does not in fact create for us a sense of connection across time.

Also pillaging the past is Angela Grossmann in pieces such as *Dog*. The nucleus from which this work compositionally unfolds is the borrowed image of a formally dressed man, reproduced by Grossmann with the generous assistance of photographic technology. Poised near this man are the dark dogs in the title, perhaps the dogs from hell discussed in critic John Bentley May's book on depression - but also, perhaps just so many dogs. You can never be quite certain when trivia will abruptly break out with the heaviest of deeper meanings.

More than ever, photography, in one technical form or another, has asserted an indispensable role in art today. Thus, the range of potential human models and other subjects has expanded considerably. In the case of both Oswald and Grossmann, the subtle sense of confusion comes from the calculated nixing of photography, never entirely bereft of its "truth factor," and "free-flow" hands-on drawing, long noted for its creative tendency to tell visual fibs.

Certainly, we vaguely sense that an "old-fashioned" work like Daniel Hughes's untitled painting that depicts from above a man in bed may just amount to a coy tissue of lies. Arguably, the true subject of this work is not the man, so masterfully painted, but the shadows. These zones, dense and almost overwhelming - a blast from an art past that includes Rembrandt and Goya - threaten to suffocate not only the man, but also the status of this work as a 21st-century creation. Hughes's art is weird in that it functions mainly as visual commentary on the changing roles of form and light through centuries of art history.

Suggested by this exhibit is the hold of the past, combined with a sense that the way to move forward - to discover new forms - is through confronting memories and those particular memories of memories reproduced in standard art textbooks. Sometimes, the "spitting image" in this show is, in fact, of the works from earlier in art history that most inspired the present artists. Occasionally, that elusive "spitting image" seems to be just a metaphor, suggesting the amorphous, ever-changing haze that most memories, aside from the most traumatic, eventually become. Other artists in this fascinating show are Bonnie Lewis, David Pelletier and Dan Kennedy and Mark Thompson.

Spitting Image, featuring 11 artists, remains on view at Art Mûr, 5826 St. Hubert, until Feb.16. For more, call (514) 933-0711 or go to [www.artmur.com](http://www.artmur.com).

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