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Janet Werner exhibit opens at McIntosh Gallery

POSTED BY TABITHA CHAN ON SEPTEMBER 18, 2014 IN ARTS | 30 VIEWS | LEAVE A RESPONSE

Janet Werner is a Canadian artist who uses an amalgamation of portrait painting and fashion culture imagery to create a dynamic conversation about what true beauty really is. Her paintings encourage viewers to reflect on the societal pressures placed on women regarding standards of beauty and physical appearance. These ideas are illustrated in her current exhibition titled Another Perfect Day at the McIntosh Gallery located on Western University's campus.

The title of this exhibition is a clichéd phrase, which speaks to how people often present themselves in ways that are stereotypical and meaningless. James Patten, the director and chief curator of the gallery, says that Werner is interested in these clichéd phrases because it emphasizes how fashion images themselves seem perfect but are somehow empty as well.

"She collects images and phrases from popular culture, fashion magazines and women's magazines. Her whole studio is filled with photographs she's ripped out from Vogue and stuff. She's working with clichés about happiness and acuteness but there's a critique built in there. It's an ironic use of that kind of language," Patten says.

The paintings in this exhibition are a selection of works from a larger series. All of Werner's works are able to hold a consistency as she uses the same process to create each one. Her paintings are bizarre collages of various elements from fashion magazines, which she uses to make a composition and then paints from that

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as source material.

“Her works are composites. She’s taking the head from one and she’s taking the dress from another – she mixes up the sources. This could be a bunny head from a children’s toy and this could be a fashion model and she moves them together like that,” says Patten.

Werner’s artwork shows viewers how easily seductive beautiful images can be and how much power they hold over the viewer without them even being fully aware of it. At first glance, the viewer simply sees an image of an attractive model wearing chic clothing.

Upon looking closely, the viewer begins to notice the exaggerations of the model in her physical body, the use of masks as confinement and the use of colour to emphasize a zombie-like complexion in their faces. In all her works, the parts of women that carry authority like hands, feet and voice are often removed or blocked. The artist is saying that people have been conditioned to accept these distortions as beautiful and normal.

“Our immediate reaction is to read them as these beautiful images but then there’s these troubling things going on. There’s an element of what I would call grotesque in her work.” Patten says.

“They’re beautiful, but they look like monsters. She negotiates between those two. She wants to engage you in that kind of reading of these images to make you think the next time you see one”

In the piece titled “Ghostyhat,” the model is positioned in a fashion-oriented pose as she is looking over her shoulder into the distance. She has large brown eyes but the yellow bags beneath them make her look weary. The real focus of this painting is actually the pile of ghosts that makes up her headpiece. The model has almost disappeared into the realm of fashion.

“Her hat has taken on this whole life of its own. The hat acts as a mask of beauty in front of all these other issues that are going on – the scary things, the complexities, the threats that aren’t apparent in the conventional representation of women,” says Patten.

Her paintings capture the complex tension that exists between both the desires and uneasiness associated with the ideals of the fashion industry. Through Werner’s work, the viewer is able to hold the two truths of wanting to look like the models in the magazines while knowing that it is a false construction at the same time.

“We’re all attracted to the seduction of a Vogue magazine photo but we also know that there’s problems in that image in terms of representations of women and that it’s not reality — that they’re

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airbrushed, that they're constructed, almost like pastries. It's very attractive and it tastes good but it's also kind of empty and bad for you at the same time," Patten says.

Werner's works present to viewers an intricate critique of the fashion industry, the male gaze and the role of women in how they impose on themselves these impossible standards of beauty. She brings these issues to the viewer but allows them to make their own interpretations.

Patten says, "That's where art is really successful. It's not a polemic telling you what is right or wrong but getting you to consider the issues and to think about your own life in relationship to them."



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