



MARCH 2021 - "THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

Janet Werner and the Portrait Reinvented at Musee d'art contemporain de Montreal



*Janet Werner, Untitled (Gallery), 2017. Oil on canvas, 223.5 x 170 cm.
National Bank Art Collection. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.*

Janet Werner

Musee d'art contemporain de Montreal

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By **JAMES D. CAMPBELL**, December 2019

That Janet Werner is a radical and uncompromising painter is clear from this tight and timely survey of works from the last ten years. The Montreal-based painter has rebooted the portrait genre and transcended many of its more stultifying tropes and staid orthodoxies since the 1990s. In the works exhibited here, strange distortions of space, shape and incidental detail have crept in that lend her paintings an edgy and even dangerous allure.

Werner prepared us for all this with the splendid prequel 'Sticky Pictures', her earlier solo exhibition at Parisian Laundry in Montréal in which she foregrounded the glorious detritus of her studio and source material and privileged process as her ethic and go to subject.

She has increasingly reached outside the frame to the paintings' production context for inspiration and sustenance. So after many years honing her portraiture with an emphasis on the female figure, Werner has now pivoted to the extravagant insides of painting, as well as the circumstances and surrounds of its making. In some works, the figure has been replaced by an ominous integer, a doppelganger visitation from the dark side.



*Janet Werner, Studio (Miro), 2017. Oil on canvas, 152.5 x 188 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Parisian Laundry, Montréal. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.*

It is as though Werner has deliberately turned her back on the subject of a portrait. Those seeming stubs and absences are, however, very suggestive in their own right, and even a little forbidding, as though the artist has chosen to interrogate portraiture itself. In a sense, her refusal of the subject is akin to the so-called ganzfeld effect (German for “complete field”), or perceptual deprivation.

Here the abstract element – say, the monochrome block -- is a site engendered by exposure to an unstructured stimulation field in which the figure has gone missing or is a spectral apparition of collapsing parts. Yet it always returns from the omnivorous black hole of the Real: foreshortened, mirrored, cropped, elongated, obscurely smudged. The elongation of an arm, foreshortening of a neck or the collapsing of a face signals a personal darkness. It is as though Werner is peeling off a bandage laid possibly across the surface of painting to assess the bloody damage beneath. The bandage, the bloody abscess and the body of painting come under scrutiny in a pirouette performed with such deft audacity that it may well leave you breathless.



Janet Werner, Reach, 2019. Oil on canvas, 55,88 X 71,12 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Parisian Laundry, Montreal.

Over the last ten years, Werner has introduced surreal, and even unsettling, postural and figural possibilities into her work, implicating her viewers in the regional ontologies of her paintings as active actors/seers/seekers rather than passive recipients of what is seen/played out therein. Werner turns the tables on her viewers – and ups the ante of her painting practice – by offering them a garden variety of distortions that are at once playful, surreal -- and which can and do result in a dangerous vertigo. This is the case with paintings such as *Reach* (2019) and *Folding Woman* (2009), among others.

Janet Werner is no stranger to the sinister alchemy of appearances in the louche alembic of the culture. Her rethinking of portraiture entails the understanding that many of her invented subjects are no longer clearly human. They have stepped outside the normal conventions of portraiture and into a Twilight Zone of the angst-riddled, uncertain psyche.



*Janet Werner, Folding Woman, 2009. Oil on canvas, 167.5 x 134.5 cm.
Private collection. Photo: Paul Litherland*

In *Birchman* (2010) and related works, Werner introduced highly unorthodox elements. This work and others remind us of the highly charged scene in David Lynch's recent *Twin Peaks: The Return* in which Sarah Palmer aka Judy, aggressed by a redneck in a bar, pulls her face off, revealing a toothed darkness beneath, and a bare moment later the perp is on the ground with gore and blood all about and a huge chunk of his neck torn and spit out. Werner drops all reserve here, and the works pack one really wicked wallop as she turns portraiture inside out.

These works offer an intrinsically interesting opening on painting's processual life, and seem possessed of a certain wilful instability, a migrant darkness, as though the artist is summoning up more sinister adumbrations of what it means to 'portray' and to 'paint'. As noted, eerie spatial distortions abound as she subjects her figuration to an extreme stress test.



Janet Werner, Untitled (Curtain), 2016. Oil on canvas. Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Purchased with the financial assistance of the Dr. Michael Braudo Canadian Contemporary Art Fund and the Art Toronto 2016 Opening Night Preview, 2016. Photo : Craig Boyko.

Werner stands beside figurative painters like Elisabeth Peyton, Dana Schutz, David Humphrey and George Condo in keeping the art of portraiture alive in the present tense of painting as a viable enterprise. She reinvents it through excess, kitsch, sundry surrealities and a range of wayward mood swings. Her thinking as a creative being is now so wed to the act of painting that such thought and her painting licks have become virtually indistinguishable. For a figurative painter, not an abstractionist, that is all the more remarkable.

As a leading practitioner of the art – here, the dark art – of picture making, Werner’s profound, ongoing auto-reflection has won her a new freedom to explore in what must count as being some of the edgiest paintings around. Her casual authority is such that she can make us believe just about anything. Her painting chops and the hoops she puts her figures through are simply that persuasive. Werner creates images that instantly seduce and then, as the spilt cream curdles as spilt cream will, floods us with nascent dismay, even as they effortlessly hold us close in a last embrace. **WM**



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