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Oil Spill: New Painting in Ontario

Group of seven

Rhiannon Vogl

Artists set out to prove that the death of painting is a myth

Move over, Renoir! SAW's summer blockbuster exhibition, *Oil Spill: New Painting in Ontario*, features over 40 works by seven emerging and established artists who set out to defy the notion that painting is old hat.

"The death of painting is a myth," insists *Oil Spill's* curator Stefan St-Laurent. "Contemporary painting just hasn't been delivered in the right way."

Linked together by a common interest in landscape and in narrative, the seven artists in the show, among them Ottawa-based Dave Cooper, Petra Halkes and Michael Harrington, at once engage with and attempt to destabilize the long, weighty tradition of painting in Ontario.

Hold on though... it is not *that* kind of painting!

While certainly in dialogue with the artistic lineage that brought us Tom Thompson's *Jack Pine* and other souvenir shop favourites, this group of seven places the human figure at the fore within their wooded or natural settings. In these works, it is not the pure, untouched terrain of the landscape that is the focus, but rather the darker, even existential stories that unfold within them. "These works all have an incredibly cinematic feel," says St-Laurent. "I would argue that they are, in a way, more satisfying than cinema because they actually challenge people to use their imagination. They open so many different narratives for each viewer."

Disturbingly voluptuous, pillowy girls find themselves intertwined within Dave Cooper's glossy, bleached-out thickets, while relationships of sexual and colonial power are played out and subverted in Kent Monkman's ironically pristine landscapes. Jaclyn Conley and Kim Dorland present divergent yet equally proverbial depictions of the adolescent experience of the wilderness, whereas Jeremy Bailey has opted to forgo the traditional canvas altogether in favour of painting through video and light. "We are really trying to show the interdisciplinary nature of painting today, to show its expansive and sculptural qualities," says St-Laurent.

Even the design of the exhibition is about defying conventional notions of what painting is, or should be. The minimalist white cube, so ubiquitous with contemporary gallery spaces, has been transformed at SAW into a sumptuous feast for the eyes. Ornate wallpaper covers two walls: one, an elegant silver on black toile; the other, an eye-popping pink on black damask. From the exposed golden ceiling drips a flowing, biomorphic canvas by Petra Halkes, and on the floor, Kim Dorland's sculpture of a three-headed deer plastered in a rainbow of colour commands the centre of the space.

Nearly every square inch of the intimate gallery oozes with elaborate layers of visual texture, from patterned walls to the thick and glossy impastos of the paintings hung on them. For other galleries, this type of exhibition design may have been regarded as over the top, but for SAW, it all plays into the gallery's desire to show painting in a new and dynamic light.

"Because painting is usually deemed a traditional medium, we wanted to show it in a very untraditional way. We wanted to break out of boring ways of exhibiting," explains SAW's director Tam-Ca Vo-Van.

For St-Laurent, it is also about allowing the process of the works to show through. "I love the fragrance of oil paint in the gallery," he remarks. "Some of these works, like Kim Dorland's *Three-Headed Deer*, are still drying! It is like being in a place between the studio and a gallery."

Oil Spill is the culmination of over two years of work for the artist-run centre. St-Laurent spent a great deal of this time travelling throughout eastern and southern Ontario, visiting artists in their studios, to seek out what he considered to be the best painters in the province.

"It is very unusual for curators of artist-run centres to do studio visits," he says. "I would have loved to travel more, to northern Ontario as well, but we were also working within a limited budget. We

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Left to right: Dave Cooper, Michael Harrington and Petra Halkes standing behind a sculpture by Kim Dorland

photo: Ben Welland

really wanted to use our funds to make the biggest impact possible."

St-Laurent adds that he sees the show as a way of not only drawing attention to the medium of painting, but also as a way to equalize artists from Ottawa with those from around the province.

"I really wanted to show that artists in Ottawa are at the level of those from Toronto," he insists. "Tam-Ca and I have been following artists like Dave, Michael and Petra for several years. Some of them have had great commercial success, but rarely get shown in this type of gallery setting. It is exciting to bring them all together."

Edgy and slick, Oil Spill seems to have achieved all that it set out to do. On view until September 15, this show is certainly worth sliding into SAW to see.

SAW Gallery is located at 67 Nicolas Street and is open from Tuesday to Sunday between 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. For more information, visit www.galleriesawgallery.com.



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