

Review

Teri Donovan: Disappearing Her Subjects

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by SKY GOODDEN

Teri Donovan *Always, Once & Again* 2009 / photo Teri DonovanTeri Donovan *Always, Once & Again* 2009 / photo Teri Donovan

Before [Jack Chambers](#) turned to high realism in the last decade of what was arguably only a half life (he died at age 40 from leukemia), he was known for a kind of magic realism wherein his painted subjects floated benevolently between materialization and disappearance. They surfaced from pastel interiors and patterned couches, or faded into fields. Chambers' paintings had the effect of sun-bleached photos, with whole subjects stolen into light.

Working four decades later, artist [Teri Donovan](#) is similarly disappearing her subjects. Set within the long cavern of Steeltown artist-run centre [Hamilton Artists Inc.](#), her latest series variously emerged and recessed within wallpaper strips, encaustic and loose pastels. Like the building's patched wooden floorboards and tin-coffered ceilings, "Half-Life" entered as though from a different century. Donovan's subjects, similarly, appear to have arrived from a flea-market photo bin.



Teri Donovan *Always, Once & Again* 2009 / photo Teri Donovan

Pot Luck pictures a group of women hovering around their floating dinnerware, a cluster of shadowless sketches peering out from a ghostly social. *Wallpaper II* repeats a single portrait in 24 wood panels, with the recurring protagonist recalling a 1950s silhouette. Through worked encaustic, paint and newspaper, Donovan variously profiles her subject with the transparency of youth and the opacity of age. In this way, the artist appears to be reconciling a woman's various selves. But with each new panel, another shift occurs, and Donovan's unfixed heroine finds yet another iteration.

The works that make up "Half-Life" alternate between portraits of suspended youth and listless postpubescence. Young girls hang suspended in portraits devoid of horizon lines; dropped spiders and hanging light bulbs accompany them like the props to some delayed allegory. Adults crowd them, their vague figures of authority headless or melancholy, and houses lean in the distance. The sense of foreboding accompanying these children's tales is affirmed in Donovan's women, who stare out from their various postures of recline and boredom like so many beautiful ruins.

Toulouse-Lautrec is evoked in Donovan's use of colour and staging. The female forms are lit harshly from beneath, their sagging chins and tired eyes beautifully weary. Gestural pastels swing around sleeve lines and produce movement in figures otherwise locked in waiting. A shock of red in the glove,

the print, the lips: sexuality persists in spite of ennui. Relief from lives papered over and choked in florals arrives with these streaks of festivity, as well as the occasional telephone, which offers a possible rescue line from these interior holdings.

- www.hamiltonartistsinc.on.ca



Teri Donovan *No Escape* 2008 / photo Teri Donovan

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