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“An Archaeology of Time” by Teri Donovan

A Wonderful Accident

Patrick Connors – Toronto: The Red Head Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of new work by Teri Donovan.

Donovan's acrylic wallpaper paintings on paper, and large-scale mixed media

works on Mylar, convert the gallery walls into sites of archaeological reclamation. The wallpapers and images in this archaeological 'dig', deal not with material objects, but rather with time and memory. They create a durational conflation in which time past and time present co-exist to form the wallpaper of contemporary life.

Donovan graduated from York University and the University of Toronto, and studied at the Ontario College of Art, the Toronto School of Art, and The Maryland Institute, College of Art in Baltimore. She is a member of the Red Head Gallery and exhibits in Toronto and Ontario. Her work was featured in *Carte Blanche Vol.2: Painting, a survey of contemporary painting in Canada.*

I asked her about the piece "Bookends". "The work is meant to reference old wallpaper," she said. "It is acrylic ink and acrylic paint wallpaper in the style of late 18th century, Toile de Jouy. It started as a fabric design depicting bucolic scenes including picnicking, horse riding, and hunting, in six recurring themes.

"These are scenes encompassing dichotomies which exist in contemporary culture, such as rich and poor; café culture and homelessness; war and kids playing video games; girls frolicking on beach and war protest. Themes as old as wallpaper.

"The materials we use in culture become the wallpaper of our lives. It's there, we accept it, and don't look at it critically. Things change, but also stay pretty much the same."

The work focuses on cultural as well as family histories, and incorporates the use of wallpaper as a signifier of temporal context. Parallels are drawn between the repeat patterns of wallpaper and the repetition of personal and cultural histories. These repetitions speak to the long half-life of influence exerted by some histories, alongside the ever-increasing speed at which contemporary developments are relegated to the past tense.

"The piece "Aphrodite" combines images of Marilyn Monroe, Britney Spears, and Lady Gaga," said Donovan. "Feminism of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd waves, including gender bending. The concept of what it means to be female. We haven't varied all that much, in that the idea of beauty fairly constant, except people are expected to be thinner. Youth is worshiped, and certain body parts are sexualized. All interspersed with an homage to Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus'. I enjoy conceptual art, combined with colour, brushstrokes, the more traditional, for that visual pleasure, but also for depth that's not just decorative."

These pieces touch on histories that linger in consciousness, like wallpaper obscured under layers of fresh paint, but continue to influence despite the accumulation of new experience. Similarly, cultural manifestations deeply ingrained over time, remain present as part of the wallpaper of contemporary life. Others however, regardless of their newness, are soon yesterday's news and are relegated to the past tense where they're buried before their time.



It Happened One Night, oil and pencil on Mylar, 5'6" x 7'

Then we looked at "It Happened One Night". "If you look at the woman, she fades into the background, becomes wallpaper," Donovan pointed out. "One of the things which can happen, when you have a baby, you become known as so-and-so's Mother. As support to the protagonist. You are part of the room supporting the design as opposed to the visual aspect.

"This is modeled after a photograph of my parents. My Mother's eyes are not smiling although her mouth is. You can see there is more going on than just enjoying a party, a certain awareness."

As in any archeological dig, some things are discovered just under the surface and others are buried beneath layers of debris. This exhibition deals with a parallel, albeit intangible dig, not so much concerned with material objects, but with time and memory. Time is the earth and memory is the shovel that sometimes re-animates and sometimes buries the past. Together they form a symbiotic partnership that affects personal as well as cultural identity.

All that was left to talk about was "Remains". "It took 7 months to do, and I questioned myself the whole way," Donovan admitted. "On mylar, it is meant to look like part of the wall. The background again looks like wallpaper, more contemporary, say 1960's. In scraping away wallpaper, you will often find older wallpaper underneath. Even in demolition, taking off layers is like going back in time. You can find newspapers, keepsakes, see what this house was like. Instead of the bits and pieces, I put the people. Again it depicts photographs from my family's album. There are iconic representations of that era – the way they are sitting, the way the man is holding his cigarette.



Aphrodite, mixed media on watercolour paper, 33 x 43"

"In art history, a movement used to last 100 years, and now it is maybe ten. A hot shot artist can be here and gone in two years. In part, this exhibit is a comment on how fast this is happening.

But also how I can convey the past and present all in the same piece. Wallpaper seemed like a good vehicle.

"The idea of using a theme of wallpaper was not something I planned on. It was just a wonderful accident."

After this show, Red Head Gallery takes a break, and rents the space out to non-collective members through August.

"An Archaeology of Time" runs until July 16, and Donovan will be there on Saturday's to answer questions. For further information please visit <http://redheadgallery.org/>

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