

VISUAL ARTS » REVIEW

# Steeltown is where the artists are



**R.M. VAUGHAN**  
**THE EXHIBITIONIST**

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**TERI DONOVAN AT HAMILTON ARTISTS INC.**

Until Aug. 14, 155-161 James St. N., Hamilton, [www.hamiltonartistsinc.on.ca](http://www.hamiltonartistsinc.on.ca)

Hamilton is the new Brooklyn. Hamiltonians will probably throttle me for the comparison. Hamilton, they argue, is already Hamilton – it does not need to remodel itself on another city. They're right, and the fear of a too-fast, Starbucks-on-every-corner gentrification is well grounded. "We're not going to be the clean-up crew for an H&M outlet," one artist alerted me. "We'd rather have boarded up windows."

However, the parallels between the two cities are unavoidable. Brooklyn is booming as an arts hub because Manhattan is unaffordable for artists. Toronto is in severe danger of out-pricing its own creative types. Hamilton, with its cheap rents and supportive arts community, looks better with each visit. And it's full of great art.

My first stop, at artist-run centre Hamilton Artists Inc., proved the long, hot car ride was worth enduring. But I'd ride twice as far for new works by painter Teri Donovan.

Half-Life, Donovan's new suite of figurative works depicting young girls and not-so-young women surrounded, if not engulfed, by layers of peeling wallpaper, is a haunting study of the transition from innocent and apprehensive childhood to knowing and resigned adulthood.

With an obvious nod to

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 proto-feminist novella *The Yellow Wallpaper* – a story wherein a wife, confined to her room, is driven to madness by the patterns on her wallpaper (and, of course, by being confined to her room) – Donovan presents two sets of arch, melancholy works wherein transitory, mysterious facial expressions are juxtaposed against relentless but stationary wallpaper patterns. Our faces, Donovan argues, are as prone to becoming caught in matrixes of identity and consciousness as wallpaper is prone to redundancy.

The portraits of young girls that make up half the exhibition all convey a kind of frozen hesitancy. The girls stare up at the viewer, apparently estranged from the moment, their faces about to change expression; perhaps to burst into tears, perhaps to forget whatever is in front of them. The mood swings of a child have rarely been captured so well in paint.

Meanwhile, the adult women portrayed all seem too aware, to the point of cynicism. Staring straight at the viewer, defiant yet tired and bored, these ladies (in gloves and ball gowns, no less) have obviously been around and could tell a story or five. The learning curves Donovan's women have endured, in the years between babyish cotton sundresses and married-off satins, hang thickly in the air, a palpable absence.

Literary meta-texts aside, Donovan is one hell of an energetic painter. Layering encaustics over paints, Mylar beside digital scans and hand-made paper, fancy stencilling next to abrupt, violent brush strokes, Donovan creates seductive surfaces that jump out at the viewer and then, like Gilman's yellow wallpaper, draw the eyes in, deeper and deeper.

Hamilton Artists Inc. is in the process of moving from



Teri Donovan's *Blink* is one of a series of works with a nod to a 19th-century, pro

its narrow gallery into a larger, multipurpose facility. Here's hoping they bring back Donovan, as her complex works deserve a more airy space.

