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ÉLAINE DESPINS'S OILS ARE VISUAL ODES TO THE BEAUTY THAT COMES FROM PURE LIGHT AND HUMAN SURFACES

Top solo show in town

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

What just might be the best solo exhibit in town is now at Maison de la culture Frontenac featuring Montreal artist Éleine Despins's majestic oils.

If the title of the show, *Presence-Emergence*, suggests deeper meaning and mystery, the works themselves are visual odes to the kind of beauty that comes from the intersection of pure light and human surfaces.

Depicted in each of the seven large paintings is a horizontal human nude, and below that, a blurred face. These elements seem to hover above an almost entirely monochrome black setting. In the case of an enigmatic work titled *Presence-Absence 7*, as with all the images having to do with the nude, it is the person's backside that greets us. Here the enormity of the well-upholstered anatomical forms emerges from meticulous, lovingly painted shadow and light.

The orange and pink hues of the upper back fade subtly into the blues and greys of the valley where back meets buttocks. Yet, though of super-size endowment, this figure, motionless in the upper centre of the composition, and benefiting from no visible support, seems as weightless as the Goodyear blimp. The result for the viewer is that the curvy tissue of skin — or paint — becomes paramount. The focus shifts entirely to expand and contour of the human body.

Yet, this fascinating painting is not altogether faceless, as we are reminded by the pesky little face seemingly suspended directly below the nude hulk, on the lower edge of our peripheral vision. In fact, such an apparition is a feature of nearly all the larger works. Done with quick brush strokes, this face, like those in other works, is a quick study in human expression.

Here, it seems the emotion is rapture, with the unfocused eyes looking into middle space. Part of Despins's triumph in such works is her ability to play emotion, something quite

ephemeral and having no tangible existence, off against sheer physical surface, itself largely mute.

In fact, perhaps even more interesting than the figure paintings is Despins's *Carré* series of seven smaller works dealing exclusively with the human face. What we get, however, is the face as function of emotion and animation and not as something primarily understood as a physical object. Despins's analysis of the face somewhat recalls Francis Bacon's intentional distortions of human anatomy and countenance.

In *Carré #1*, for example, the face, seen frontally, has abruptly shifted to our left, so that what meets the eye is two noses. This blurred spectre, it should be noted, is knitted together by a tissue of brushwork that has a kind of exuberant drama. The pale-to-pink flesh tones seem to spin off into the dark monochrome background.

Despins gives us reason to believe that figure painting,

even of a vaguely traditional sort, lives on.

Meanwhile, the three Montreal artists in the other gallery space in the Maison de la culture de Frontenac provide hope that that other traditional genre, landscape, has not been entirely relegated to history and Sunday daubers.

Suzanne Joubert's oil on paper creation titled *Survivor II* consists of two vertical banners themselves as tall as medium-size trees. On these strips are depicted, in much detail, several trees tapering, so that they appear to reach the sky. The notion of survival, or lack of, is asserted by the stripping away of some of the pigment to produce horizontal white bands.

Presumably, cut into as they are, the trees will die, though the painting itself is certainly filled with a life of its own.

Also vast is Luc Bergeron's oil titled *Mémoire du temps* (*Memory of Time*). This work, a patchwork-collage is dominated by wide, dark branches that threaten ultimately to

shut out all sunlight. Depth of field is suggested by the fat daubs of paint, leaves that are alternately concise and blurred.

For Nycol Beaulieu, landscape is a rhythmic pattern of blotches and reflections. In her *Lac du bord*, a view of the land from across a lake, the colour of the background trees is visually echoed in inverted form in the smooth water in the foreground.

In all this, the role of actual brush mark is perfectly counterpointed by what the accumulated brush marks represent in the real world.

Beaulieu is not only interested in taking the long view on the land, but also delights in close-up samplings of nature, as in her series of miniature oils collectively titled *Forêt* profound.

Consisting of 15 little blocks of wood, each bearing a painting, *Forêt* is a scan of the underbrush, with special notice given to the pebbles, twigs and broken leaves. Again, it is the weave of paint itself that seduces the viewer.

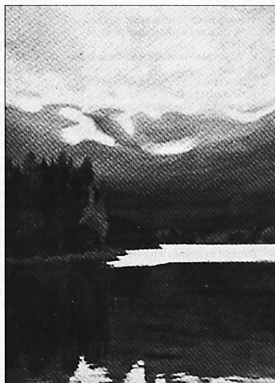
Certainly, as demonstrated in the current exhibit, the landscape genre still provides wide space and shadowed shelter for artistic experimentation and for pursuit of the sheer pleasure of painting.

And it continues to serve as a metaphor for our most ineffable, inner sense of emotion as well as for the natural world as a whole.

However, don't expect to find in the current show just some more nice scenes mixed in with noble thoughts.

The panoramas on view at the Maison de la culture Frontenac may borrow from actual geographical sites, but the one true location attained by all three artists is that promised land known generally as high art. This show is more than worth a visit.

Presence-Emergence, recent oil paintings by Éleine Despins and Boréale, works by Nycol Beaulieu, Luc Bergeron and Suzanne Joubert remain on view at the Maison de la culture Frontenac, 2550 Ontario St. E. (Frontenac métro), until



Lac du Bord by Nycol Beaulieu.