

Elaine Despins: *The Sea Inside*

By P.A. Sévigny
The Suburban

"Diving in the eyes of another, we touch something so familiar that we have the strange sensation of diving into the depths of ourselves. In the stillness of the gaze, what is revealed is the essence of that which perceives in us... the sea inside." — Elaine Despins, 2007

Some people say painting is dead.

"Painting is finished," said former Montreal artist Darryl Legge. "It died when Jackson Pollock began to throw it all over the place."

As far as Legge is concerned, nothing new has happened in painting since Pollock and other abstract expressionists blazed their way through New York's post-war art scene.

"Painting is going to become a classical art form like ballet," he said. "How can you do something new when it's all been done before?"

But after seeing *The Sea Inside*, Montreal artist Elaine Despins's new exhibition on display in Dominique Bouffard's Amherst Street gallery, some critics could object to Legge's ideas on painting and its immediate future.

Even amidst our hyperactive visual culture, where over-saturation is the norm, painting is alive and well — and most definitely will live on. While Despins's painting continues to work within the framework of the western tradition, the basic elements of its art remain the same. Art may not have all the answers, but it sometimes does ask the proper questions. The fact that Despins knows how to paint helps build that argument.

To her credit, Despins slowly builds up her painting, stroke by stroke, from light to dark, with all the patience, care and affection so clearly evident in her work. As opposed to the omnipresent and, as some would say, omnivorous "shock and awe" techniques so popular and prevalent in today's contemporary art scene, Despins's work is self-assured and displays a confidence that is rare in such a young painter.

With less than 10 years of full-time experience as an artist and painter, Despins's work is clearly her own. Since *Présence-Emergence*, her last major exhibition, her style has now broken away from the rest mainstream contemporary art crowd. However, while her paintings are strong and rooted in a specific reality of her own creation, each and every one owes a debt to *Olympia*,



COURTESY OF GALERIE DOMINIQUE BOUFFARD

Edouard Manet's young prostitute who continues to answer the viewer's gaze with a naked, raw, and brutally honest "naked" look of her own.

Freud always considered water to be the ultimate symbol of our own sub-conscious realities. After all, who does not wonder as to what lies beneath the surface of those calm lakes or stormy seas. And as such, Despins's use of color (tones of both aqua and ultra-marine dominate these paintings) refers to water as being the dominant theme of this exhibition. The eyes of each and every one of her models, young and old, continue to engage the viewer's attention as they lie prone and deep within the picture plane. While the floor's reflective surface provides some depth to the painting, it also refers to water, its surfaces and the secrets hidden beneath it. Contrary to Despins's previous work, these new paintings include visual reference points by which we all construct the depth of field required for our own visual realities.

However, Despins achieves her ultimate goal when the model's eyes, which dominate each and every painting, become the mirror by which the viewers come to see what's below the surface of their own self, the realities beneath the reflections of their own surface — the sea inside their own selves.

This is an important show. Go see it. ■