

Tanya Harnett: persona grata

May 13 - June 20, 2009



Art Gallery of Regina

Tanya Harnett: Hiding in Plain Sight

Tanya Harnett's pose in "Steam" is portrait studio orthodox. However something is off. Her face is impassive, as it is throughout the sixteen life-sized, photo-based prints in *Persona Grata*. She looks tired and squints slightly, as if we were difficult to see. We are; she is, too. Between us is a sheet of glass two-thirds fogged by steam. It screens her body and part of her face and encourages us to reconsider the transparency of photographs.

This steamy window is a visual joke on the picture plane, the boundary—often figured as between pictorial space and our three dimensional world. On the picture side of this pane, illusionary space appears to recede from the glass. In photography, the transparency of the picture plane is rarely troubled—we look thorough a surface into a scene. "Steam's" condensation makes the invisible convention visible. Glazing disrupts the gaze; the apparent glass calls attention to the fact that images are flat and constructed and reminds us that a lens and temperament come between the subject and us.

Pressed in the margin between the glass and a parallel blank wall, Harnett's shades perform on a cramped stage as deep as outstretched arms or as narrow as a thread. Ten of the prints have a sheet of fogged, rippled, broken or painted glass or cloth as picture planes. "Stretch," for example, is a barely-there play of light and shadow over a warm, beige ground. Thin, taut, translucent fabric concretizes the theatrical 'fourth wall'. From the other side of this epidermal veil the artist impresses her profile and hands. The rigid barrier softens into a tactile, flexible membrane that seems to permit the intrusion of an entity from the flat world into our thick space by a few centimeters. The supposedly frozen moment writhes with life just below the skin of the image. The picture seems to be unpicturing itself, struggling toward being a real presence, breaching the pictorial caul, to birth as flesh and blood.

Harnett appears to see the proximity to others that portraits appear to provide as an illusion. She seems to suggest that photographic conventions show what we look like at the expense of who we are. Making an appearance, composing ourselves for the camera often sacrifices person to persona. Surprisingly, we see more of the artist in "Steam" than in any other picture. Of the sixteen self-portraits, her face is visible, though interfered with, in six; dramatically averted, fragmented or greatly obscured in seven; and entirely absent in three. Altogether, we see only eight open eyes! Why does she resist one of the fundamental elements of portraiture? On one hand, she may be suspicious of the adage 'the eyes are the windows to the soul'. The notion that we can know more by looking than by verbal discourse is Romantic and prone to self-deception. Viewers do not see as much as they project their desires and cultural assumptions into the eyes of another. Better to draw the blinds. On the other hand, she might believe that the eyes are indeed windows but should open infrequently to protect the privacy of the inhabitant. Harnett screens easy receptions of her likeness. She refocuses our attention from her eyes to other signifiers of identity. It is a perverse portrait that obscures its subject, but Harnett's de-conventionalizing intervention reveals more of her self than an ordinary portrait could. By her refusing to display signs of pleasure or displeasure, or to pull a face, we are left to fill in the blank. Harnett's strategy of hiding in plain sight is a means to both publish and protect her public introspection. She seems to want to be recognized, 'read' by the knowing and sympathetic, and shielded from the ignorant, hostile, possessive and critical.

Tanya Harnett is a member of the Carry-the-Kettle First Nation. Her great-grandfather, Dan Kennedy (Ochankugahe/Path Maker), wrote *Recollections of an Assiniboiné Chief*. While she is a proud Assiniboiné woman who embraces her cultural identity, she excludes feathers, 'Indian' jewelry, regalia, buffalo, eagles, or other overt signifiers of her heritage. This eviction seems to ask, 'aside from these outward shows, what does Nateness look like?' Instead, she takes ordinary items and infuses them with clever recodings that escape the superficial.

In the "Sleep of Reason" the artist lays her head on a white table. Substituting the flying nightmare figures from Goya's etching, "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters," are the white on white words, "white" and "lies." This is the most overt comment on racism in the exhibition. A 'white lie' is an untruth told for an apparent good reason. By racializing 'white', Harnett hints that white lies are often employed

paternalistically for 'our own good' but it is really a means of concealing power by keeping someone 'in the dark.' The title may suggest that the irony of colonialism is that it required Europeans at the height of their Enlightenment to put reason to sleep. Greed anesthetized reason, permitting them to dehumanize other people, which made stealing land and resources seem reasonable. On the other hand, perhaps she is saying that reason is a sleep, that rationalism is responsible for systemic racism: reason over (com)passion.

In "Flag" Harnett is smothered by a wet Canadian flag which bisects her face into red and white halves. It is an acknowledgment of her 'mixed blood' but also the absurdity of separating one aspect of her cultural/ racial self from the other. Mixed race people cannot afford to see the world in binaries. The dampness barely allows us to see her face beneath the politically divided layer. "Flag" also suggests that Canada's two founding nations are not the French and English but the 'White' and 'Red' peoples.

"Glass" is impenetrable without a discourse on colour. The obscured head of an indeterminately gendered person holds up a sheet of glass. Above the head, a large, blank wall features a warm range of skin tones from very light reds and yellow to brown and beige. The portrayal of race as colour is subtle. It reminds us that colour is an effect of light; that it is not an essential but a conditional property of things; and that it has a spectrum without firm divisions.

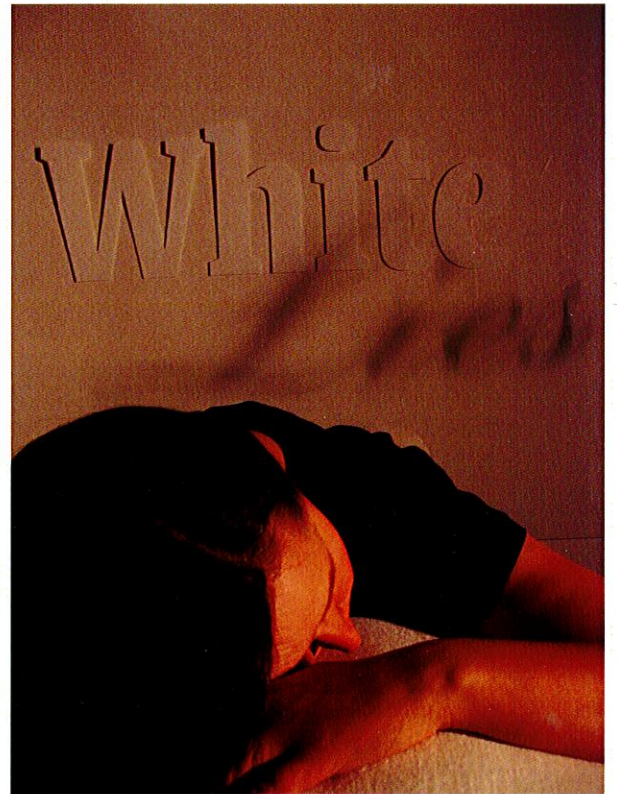
Another subtle Aboriginal signifier in these works is the use of vapour. It appears as thick mist in "Candle" and fog on a sheet of glass in "Steam" and "Blue." Steam is associated with the sweat lodge, the womb where the four elements mix: fire, stones, water and air. The Sweat is a cleansing ceremony, a ritualized site of teaching and memory, a means of reconnecting to the earth, spirit, tradition and each other. The lodge is a place of teaching, protocol, dark, discomfort and the release of physical and psychic toxins. Harnett's sweat chambers allude to the sacred, but they are not traditionally sacred places. They are domesticated echoes, make-do spaces between tradition and contemporary realities. Her spirituality is signified covertly in the exhibition (steam, sacred colours, images of stoic meditation). She avoids clichés because too often 'Indians' are associated and contained by received notions of spirituality.

By identifying as Aboriginal, Harnett does not have the privilege (at this cultural moment) of being (only) herself. Her self-portraits represent her as individual-and-Aboriginal. As such, they engage the whole history of the representational objectification of Aboriginal people by lenses wielded by settlers. Those photographs recorded, classified and distributed types to an eager public. Aboriginal self-portraiture wrests the primary tool of representation from the hands of the former colonizer, now neighbour. In the hands of an Aboriginal artist, it is a political tool that shows not only that 'I exist,' but 'I am an agent in the construction of my identity.' Harnett wants viewers to see past the clichés and consider the personhood behind the contested surfaces.

David Garneau 2007/9



Flag digital print on BFK Rives paper, 40"x53.5", 2007



Sleep of Reason digital print on BFK Rives paper, 40"x53.5", 2007

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ART GALLERY OF REGINA

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2420 Elphinstone Street, PO Box 1790,
Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 3C8

ISBN # 978-1-896432-83-0

This body of work was originally shown at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in 2007 in an exhibition curated by Joan Stebbins. David Garneau's essay is a condensed version of the one published in the Southern Alberta Art Gallery catalogue ISBN -10:189469941

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Design: Steve McDonnell: Dalek Design @ dalek.ca

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The Art Gallery of Regina gratefully acknowledges the support of the Regina Arts Commission, the Saskatchewan Arts Board, Saskatchewan Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture, & Recreation, SaskCulture, SaskTel, Sask Energy, SaskCentral, Greystone Managed Investments, TD Canada Trust, Framemasters Gallery, and the Cathedral Free House.

