

A DIFFERENT BEAUTY

October 15 - November 21, 2009



Art Gallery of Regina



Iris Hauser, "Waiting", oil on canvas, 35"x 51", 2007 (Photography: Zach Hauser)

Cover: Zhong-Yang Huang, "Western Witch and Eastern Wizard", 36"x36", 2009

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Is beauty a constant or is it nothing more than an individual instance of aesthetic pleasure?

Surely beauty is an ideal – an abstract proposition – that, like other idealizations, like other forms of the 'ideal', operates beyond logic. It figures in our responses to and understanding of nature, in our conception and depiction of the 'ideal' human body (which is, in Christian theology, created in God's image) and in our notion of perfection. Throughout the history of art, beauty is often linked to the divine in the form of heavenly beings, from gods to goddesses. Indeed, beauty seems to play a large role in our mythologies and cosmologies.

For many who visit galleries, the idea of beauty is linked artistically to the 'high' art of the past, thus defining and limiting how visual beauty can be considered and engaged. But does beauty now reside only in the past? If the work in this exhibition is any example, the answer has to be 'no'. As this exhibition shows us, beauty can, does and perhaps must arise in the present.

David Dreher's hotly coloured images interrogate what happens when beauty is about to be erased from view. His images of pairs of animals find their source in Aesop's Fables – some of the most famous children's stories. But they are of course more than mere fanciful fabulous tales: they encode an ethic about 'right' behaviour and productive action. With the animals in his paintings each back-grounded by post-consumer packaging (from decorative wrapping paper to plastic) and each 'framed' with painted nature motifs more baroquely decorative than realistic, we understand that at this point in human history we are at odds with nature: that we have an un-natural relationship to and understanding of nature itself. Indeed, these animals' framed containment becomes a metaphor for the way we as contemporary co-inhabitants of this planet have framed nature – as something distant and separated from us. Dreher's images inquire into our 'right' action relative to nature - which is a crucial question at this moment in time when the environment is under serious threat largely due to our 'wrong' actions. Dreher's work here is grounded then in an almost spiritualized ethic – one that positions us not outside but within the ecosystem: one not tainted by adult demands but alert to a shared universal form of innocence.

Filled with both strange symbols, familiar figures, unrealistic spaces and high key colors, **Iris Hauser's** visually complex paintings are meditations that dwell on our personal and cultural responses to questions of life and death. Passionately painted with passionate colors, they resist the cool dispassion of late Modernism, instead finding home in excess, contrast and the impossible. Emotionally felt, they are mysterious allegories less realistic than surrealistic - less about the present we inhabit than about a past, present or future we can only obliquely remember, inhabit or imagine. Indeed, these quiet tableau-like images

embody other states of mind and other states of being: they invoke an interior life described through beauty – whether the 'beautiful' is asserted via traditional iterations of it (in the physical realm: flowers, the beautiful/perfect body, the ripe sexuality of male with female etc; in the realm of the spiritual realm: angels, gods, etc.) or more problematically (and thus interestingly) via untraditional iterations (a bull exuding animal passion and power raging against the dying of the light, the ripe sexuality of a middle-aged female, a man on his death's bed). These images speak to the cycles of nature in all their manifestations and their beauties, to our continuities and discontinuities and to the voyages we take in our making and unmaking.

Trained from his childhood in China to paint in classical western academic style, **Zhong-Yang Huang's** delicately executed images explore notions of beauty and harmony as they have been written via the iconography of both Chinese and European art history. Seamlessly fusing realism with allegorical symbolism, his warm colour palette, subtle depiction of light and soft romanticism reject events of the everyday offering up instead quiet moments of beauty, grace and mystery. Deploying the female nude with a brightness, clarity and detailed precision that recalls the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (who painted in England in the late 1800s), his work like theirs understand mimesis and the imitation of nature to be foundational to art. Certainly the female nude occupies a central location in the European canon where it represents either or both physical and spiritual beauty. In several cases here though, the figure is located in the presence of Chinese diety figures - gods and protector beings whose role it is to maintain cosmic harmony. That sense of balance is evident in all Zhong-Yang Huang's work which refuses borders in order to engage the dominions of the heavens, nature and the human in a gentle suggestion of some larger mystery.

While beauty clearly bedevils art (we often assume that the too-beautiful thing is devoid of content or meaning), David Dreher, Iris Hauser and Zhong-Yang Huang fearlessly assert it in their paintings. However they do so knowingly. Not only do they understand beauty as an antidote to our current impersonal social misalignments and missteps but deploy it as strategy offering another way of being in and thinking about the world. These three artists are all interested in affect – in reawakening some small aspect of our non-rational emotional and even spiritual lives. While this is simultaneously foolish and brave, it is also idealistic – which is, of course, what beauty is all about in the first place...

Jack Anderson
2009



David Dreher, *"The Peacock and the Jackdaw"*, oil on canvas, 18"x36", 2008

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