

Between the glossies and the grotesque Janet Werner paints a world

by Ara Osterweil



Janet Werner, *Blue Table*, 2019, oil on canvas, 76 x 60 inches. Photo: Guy L'Heureux. All images courtesy the artist.

Nothing less than an epic disfiguration of the female body was on display in Janet Werner's exhibition at Montreal's Museum of Contemporary Art. Showcasing her relentless anatomization of female subjectivity, this survey of the last decade sampled the painter's consistent exploration of carnivalesque parody and female masquerade before culminating in a haunting suite of still lifes. Organized with a canny eye for visual and thematic correspondence by curator François LeTourneux, the retrospective demonstrated the keen intelligence that Werner brings to portraits of women negotiating the perils of exposure.

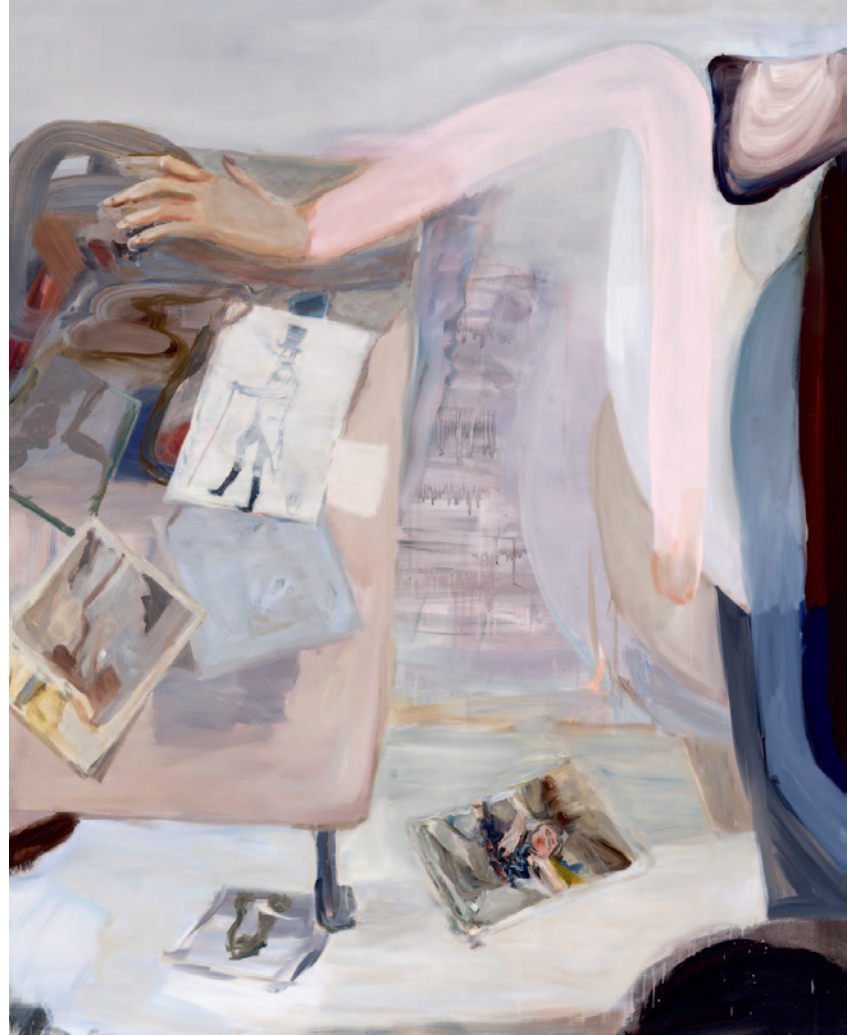
Poaching images from the annals of fashion and art history, before distorting them through the lens of her own uncanny imagination, Werner is in constant dialogue with classical and modern masters like Goya, Picasso, Manet and Picabia. Yet, she also cites a range of artistic foremothers similarly obsessed with self-fashioning. Like Diane Arbus, Werner uncovers the masked and monstrous among us; like Cindy Sherman, she appropriates images of women from popular culture, not to celebrate their idealized postures but to defamiliarize them. By rigorously mediating her use of photographic sources, Werner bridges the gap between portraiture and postmodern critique.

Yet, in addition to the entwined legacies of painting and photography, Werner reckons with other issues. Critic Harold Bloom famously described the male poet's wrestling with his literary "fathers" as an "anxiety of influence," but for women artists, other concerns arise. Not only do Werner's paintings both quote and misread her artistic forebears, as Bloom describes, they also foreground what it means to be looked at while simultaneously struggling to see. No wonder she borrows equally from haute couture and the Western canon, which share in the specularization of the female body.

Artistic ancestry is, of course, only part of the painter's inheritance. The fact that Werner's father, who had a penchant for brutal judgments, was a surgeon of corrective vision resonates in the artist's refusal to hold a mere mirror up to patriarchy's ideals. Though she is capable of dashing off masterful paintings of classic beauties, Werner's greatest strength is the way her inimitably warped perspective divulges so much more than any perfect lens could perceive. While her paintings reveal a tumult of ugly feelings lurking beneath their muses' comely surfaces, they also ingeniously deflect ocular penetration.



Folding Woman, 2009, oil on canvas, 66 x 53 inches. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.



Hover, 2017, oil on canvas, 74 x 60 inches. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

Eva, 2019, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.



Portrait (red curtain), 2019, 84 x 67 inches. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.



Folds, splits, halves and hybrids

Caught between the glossies and the grotesque, Werner's women bend, stretch, fold, split and mask in their attempts to shield themselves from our gaze. The irony of the painter's distortions is that the images of women she appropriates from *Vogue* and *Harper's* have already been disfigured, both surgically and digitally—with their lengthened legs, airbrushed skin, plumped lips and enlarged breasts. While this makes fashion magazines the modern equivalent of the rack, Werner is less interested in making any facile critique of women's objectification than she is in focusing the eternal existential dilemma of subjectivity through a more accurately gendered lens.

By folding a woman's face in on itself, splitting an image like a cadaver or suturing an "exquisite corpse" from a set of mismatched halves, Werner indexes the disjointed affects that define our self-perceptions. Through an increasingly sophisticated practice of collage, in which she composes a painted figure from fragments of different photographic sources, Werner's work reconciles the cultural imperative for women to look pretty with the anguish of being human.

Folding women

Take, for example, *Folding Woman*, 2009, in which a lithe model in a white nightie and military jacket loses her face to a brutally situated crease in the image from which she presumably sprang. Can this faceless image even be described as a subject? Deprived of the facial markers of personality—though still sporting a fashionably tousled mane and great pair of legs—the figure confronts us with the fold itself as a metaphor for the negation of female subjectivity. While Werner's negation might be read as a violent act of erasure, it is also a daring feat of self-fashioning. Like the military jacket her model wears, the artist transforms the fold into an ambiguous signifier of subjection. Is this a portrait of a woman defaced by the male gaze, or denied sovereignty by the labial folds of her anatomy (as in Freud's infamous misogynist account)? In Werner's hands, she is both and neither, for the fold protects as much as it punishes. Through the break in the image, we encounter not only the materiality of the real but the possibility for escaping it.

Self-portraits

What happens, however, when the disguise fails to safeguard? With a gloved hand clutching three loaded paintbrushes and her visage camouflaged by paint splotches, *Dreamer*, 2012, offers a glimpse of the artist through a transparent voile with her breasts exposed for all the world to see. By installing this self-portrait askance from a shrunken-headed *Sheila*, 2011, whose arms cover her crotch while her enormous nude breasts "stare" at the viewer as blankly as their mistress's eyes, curator LeTourneux theatricalizes the female artist's paradoxical vulnerability. As ingeniously as the painter thematizes performativity and masquerade, hardly any of us can completely break free from the grotesque stereotypes that have defined femininity. It's no wonder that so many of Werner's women retreat into the fold or wield a witchy disguise.

Throughout history, portraitists have occasionally, if not compulsively, turned the mirror upon themselves. This urge is complicated for a painter who works mostly with appropriated, imagined and hybridized figures. While many of Werner's paintings are metaphorical self-portraits, very few present recognizable images of the artist. Occasionally, however, a relatively unmasked apparition peeks out from among her more embellished doubles. In a small room adjacent to the main, tripartite gallery space, a diminutive painting entitled *Sisters*, 2012, reveals two figures foundering as they prepare their faces to meet the world. While the extrovert mouths a toothy grimace that nonetheless fails as a smile, the introvert's mien melts into a crude haze of brown and beige brush strokes. An anomalous glimpse into the artist's family life, *Sisters* is a double portrait of two middle-aged women trapped in the shadow of adolescent self-doubt. (It's no wonder their elongated necks strain from clothes oversized enough to be a mother's.) Even when paralyzed by the optometrist's gaze, painting provides a reliable escape: with a few dabs of the *Dreamer's* loaded brush, the unmasked face makes of itself another mask.

Criss-cross

Werner's self-awareness is hardly limited to her various doppelgangers. LeTourneux underscored this in his astute juxtapositions of women seeming to relay mysterious messages to each other across gallery spaces criss-crossed with repeating patterns and references. In one team of twisted sisters, a masked woman in a sexy, diaphanous shirt and bra throws shade at a bare-breasted, dumbfounded Cyclops wearing nothing above the waist but a pair of star-shaped pasties (*Criss Cross*, 2015; *Performer*, 2014). In a more whimsical encounter, a picture of polka dots tossed on a table in an otherwise desolate *Studio (Miro)*, 2017, seems to wink knowingly at those adorning the dress of one wonderstruck *Lucy*, 2011—as if to remind this bewildered creature that she, too, is nothing more than a picture. By ensnaring big-breasted dingbats in



Scar curtain, 2019, oil on canvas, 28 x 22 inches. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

Green Room, 2018, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.





Beacon, 2019, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

charged encounters with more enigmatic viragos, LeTourneux envisioned both the communality and conflict between them. His arrangements suggest that not only the women but the details themselves are in on Werner's secret. We, however, remain at arm's length—even as the artist invites us into the studio to peruse her process.

Sticky pictures

As evidenced by the title of her “Sticky Pictures” show in 2017 at the Montreal gallery Parisian Laundry, Werner is obsessed with the persistence of pictures, which not only implant themselves in the mind but stubbornly cling to the body. She cleverly embodies this in the magnificent *Untitled (gallery)*, 2017, by hanging an assortment of effigies “salon style” on the skirt of a nonplussed-looking woman. In a room that borrowed heavily from the aforementioned 2017 exhibition, viewers had the opportunity to witness what happens when the proverbial curtain is pulled back. Affording a glimpse into the solitude of the artist's labour, these “empty” atelier still lifes are nonetheless populated with images, which are tacked to walls, scattered on tables, spilling out of manila folders and otherwise petitioning to be brought to life. Lonely as some of these tableaux are—the sublime *Sorcerer*, 2016, is a Hopperesque symphony of bluish greys crowned, inexplicably, with a pair of false tits—they are also profoundly relational in their staging of the intimacy between the artist and her paper-thin muses. As evidenced by portentous visions of the artist's hand thrusting from beyond the frame in both *Hover (the distance between here and there)*, 2017, and *untitled (reach)*, 2019, this relation is as tactile as it is optical. As the title of *Touch hold (still life)*, 2019, attests, Werner's still lifes are hardly inanimate or lacking in psychological frisson. Whether searching for the elusive image that might be transformed into something more than it seems or reaching for a photograph the way one yearns for a body, the artist grabs at meaning with an intensity usually reserved for lovers. As Werner's practice insists, however, pictures grab back.

Hover and *Sorcerer* are the masterpieces of this brilliant series, but I couldn't help pausing in front of the understated *Plant*, 2016, which situates a potted spotted begonia in the foreground of a nearly empty room. Of course, this being a still life by Janet Werner, there's most likely a woman lurking somewhere—and indeed there is: way back on the far wall is a taped-up image of a grey-haired woman, hung askance and sliced down her middle. Hardly upstaged by the model bending over backwards to solicit our attention, the begonia captivates with a modest self-sufficiency that Werner's women conspicuously lack. By not giving a damn about our gaze, *Plant* holds its own among the hotties. Yielding far more personality than the faceless *Folded Woman*, the begonia hovers in the non-human space between subjecthood and objecthood. So, too, does the indisputably inanimate *Blue Table*, 2019, a painting of—what else?—a cobalt studio desk leaning against a wall patterned in an ethereal moiré of pale brush strokes. An image of a wild-maned model dressed in turquoise may be tacked above it, but she can hardly compete with the majesty of the table itself. By foregrounding this minimalist structure, Werner reminds us that behind every act of creation is not an emptiness asking to be filled but

a world of things indifferent to our efforts. The artist's head-on confrontation with this indifference is what makes this simple work so powerful.

Werner's reckoning with the mute thinginess of minimalism in her studio still life paintings brought a conceptual rigour to her work. But this series also troubles the equivalence between women and objects. In *Green Room AJ*, 2018, a softcore image of the ass and boot-strapped gams of a gal on her knees is affixed to the upper corner of a viridian-hued chamber. Mocked by the malachite walls that surround her, she is simultaneously a misogynist fetish and an art historical citation. Making explicit reference to pop artist Allen Jones's *Chair, Hatstand and Table*, 1969—a trio of erotic sculptures that transformed scantily clad women into furniture and thereby earned the feminist ire of their time—Werner doesn't bother to transform this prop back into a person. Treating even this outrage as just another image, Werner instead positions the viewer to gaze placidly up at the ceiling. There, a paler hue square of green paint that is neither a glass ceiling nor a skylight calmly announces that there is no way up and no way out. Werner is hardly a denier of the need for the ongoing struggle for women's rights, but it is still difficult to discern whether the emphasis of this work is feminist, post-feminist or formalist. By inviting us to contemplate the colour of the room as much as its content, she dares us to re-encounter the visual culture of the past without being assured that we know what it means. In spite of its ambiguity, the image sticks.

Curtains

When the female figure regains her central place in Werner's tableaux, she shatters all illusions about the innocence of the painter's allusions. In *Untitled (Curtain)*, 2016, a papery image of a woman with a torn forehead suggests the devastating indifference with which a frontal lobe might be parted like a curtain. Although this memento mori bears her lobotomy with grace and equanimity, her downcast eyes seem to recognize that even the painter's reach cannot redeem her.

Such defeat is nowhere in evidence in *Portrait (red curtain)*, 2019, where Werner enshrouds an image of an obscenely long-necked woman in a gorgeous profusion of billowing crimson. Riffing on the exhibition's recurring theme of curtains, this painting hearkens back to Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, 1650, as well as Francis Bacon's screaming 1953 “remake” of it, to remind us how the history of Western painting might be retold as a glossary of opulent drapery. By substituting one of her evasive doppelgangers for their papal subjects, Werner reminds us of the chasm between mortal man's striving for divinity and a woman craning her neck to emerge from the two-dimensional object world. Issuing from the womb of a red canopy verging on exquisite abstraction, an awfully green-tinged, phallic neck announces that this scarlet woman is not a shrinking violet. Seemingly liberated from the brass coils that transformed the Kayan women of Myanmar into an ethnographic spectacle, Werner's ringer refuses to be dwarfed by the sumptuously painted theatrical curtains that frame her, or the history of images they reference. Shielding her eyes with a pair of dark aviator glasses, she's prepared to grow a new one to break free from the prison house of ornamentation. Exalted as she may be, there is nothing innocent about her.





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Untitled (Curtain), 2016, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

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1. *Sisters*, 2013, oil on canvas, 22 x 20 inches. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

2. Installation view, "Janet Werner," 2019–2020, Musée D'Art Contemporain de Montréal, Montreal. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.

For all of the feminist implications of her work, Werner prizes painting above politics. Illuminated across the room like a Vermeer in Versace is a stunning portrait of a wide-eyed model, signalled like a lodestar with her sky-blue gaze. Bedecked in a luxe black, white and yellow sweater and headscarf, and poised in a golden beam of light, *Beacon*, 2019, reminds us what Werner is capable of when she simply wants to dazzle. After all of the artist's ingenious contortions, her beauty was a balm for weary eyes. ■

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