

CAPTIVE BEAUTY: WERNER & NELSON AT MCINTOSH GALLERY

We exist in a visual culture, one that bombards us with images tailored to illicit specific reactions.

Buy this, think that, come here, go there — advertising is so pervasive that many of us aren't aware of the extent to which we are being manipulated.

Some might even argue that these days, beauty is no longer in the eye of the beholder.

Rob Nelson: Photographs 1977 to 2014 and Janet Werner: Another perfect day, two concurrent exhibitions pres-



JANET WERNER, BEAR (OIL ON CANVAS, 2010)

ently on at the McIntosh Gallery, look at our relationship to fashion, the seductive pull of its expression, and how it impacts the way we feel about ourselves.

Upon entering the main gallery space, a cursory glance of the large oil on canvas works strike us as eloquent portraits of beautiful women. But there's more than meets the eye.

"When you first see Janet's paintings, you think they are pretty. As you take a deeper look, you see that there's a lot going on," explained James Patten, McIntosh director.

"There's the notion that even though most people find it attractive, fashion and beauty is also repressive. Is the

model her own person, or is she a vehicle for others to impose their views? The interesting thing about the artist is she's not saying it is good or bad — she is saying it is complex. We're caught in a cycle where we want to be free but we're seduced by beauty," he added.

As a case in point, *Bear* (2010) depicts a model striking a classic high-fashion pose, wearing a red jacket with black epaulettes and white riding pants. Wispy blond hair peeks out from underneath a ... bear's head? What at first appears to be a teddy bear mask is, on closer

inspection, rather disturbing.

"The heads or hats the models are wearing become a persona for them all; it's like they're hiding," Patten said. Placing the head of an animal — particularly the cuddly kind found in children's books — on a woman's body is a recurring theme in the Montreal artist's portraits.

"Anything that's cute is subject to being abused. (Werner) examines how women are represented by fashion. They're attractive but they're vulnerable," Patten said.

Werner commonly distorts her figures, such as exaggerating the head in *Girl in Brown Suit* (2009),

the misdirection on *Big Girl* (2011), or the breasts on *Sheila* (2011). There is a clear link between this device and how popular culture distorts our perception of beauty.

When the faces are not obscured, they possess a curious power. "The women (Werner) portray look like they're under a spell, but at the same time, they're casting a spell on us. There is this interesting duality: are they looking at us, or are we looking at them?" Patten asked.

De Mille (2010), the portrait that greets us immediately upon entering, perfectly encapsulates the overarching theme of Werner's work.

"The hair, shoulders, the position are

so dominant that her face has disappeared. She's faceless; the construction of beauty has totally overwhelmed her. She has an intricate hairdo and dress — but she's gone," Patten said.

The paintings are contrasted with Rob Nelson's photos on display in the smaller gallery space across the way. Even though the London-based photographer has enjoyed a busy career spanning four decades, due to the nature of his editorial work, this is his first-ever solo exhibition. Here we have a very different take on the art of portraiture.

At the forefront of the shift in the aesthetic of fashion photography that occurred in the mid-80s, Nelson is credited for taking his subjects out of the highly controlled environment of the studio and into the street.

The innovation had such publications as *Interview Magazine*, *Canadian Art*, *Saturday Night, Flare*, and *Chateleine* calling.

As with Werner's show, these photographs possess keen sensitivity, but unlike the paintings, they don't leave the viewer feeling unsettled. This makes for an interesting dichotomy between the two artists and their approach to conventional beauty.

Shots of well-known figures — from Prince Andrew to Margaret Atwood, from Isaac Mizrahi to Karen Kain — are interspersed with anonymous subjects who trusted Nelson enough to allow him to see their most intimate sides.

Some photos reveal quiet moments of Londoners such as former Miss Universe Karen Baldwin, Western faculty Sky Glabush, and the late Western Professor Emeritus Ross Woodman.

Hanging on the wall behind the gallery's front desk is an enlargement of Kirsten Dunst circa 1998. Resting on a couch alongside her dog in the comfort of her own apartment, there is no pretense of the actress trying to reinvent herself for the camera. Such is the magic of Nelson's candid camera.

Be sure to visit the McIntosh Gallery to check out the exhibition before it closes on November 1.

— Amie Ronald-Morgan