VISUAL ART

Janet Werner
by Cameron Skene

In painting a family portrait of the rather genetically challenged Charles IV, Francisco de Goya had to convince the royals that the sickly, idiotic faces that peered from the masses of paint were a fair likeness. He gave them mirrors to compare themselves, and while they never commissioned him again, they seemed convinced enough that they let the matter rest. Meanwhile, the portrait was subversive enough to prod one critic, French poet Théophile Gautier, to comment that they looked "like the corner baker and his wife after they won the lottery."

"Who's Sorry Now?" by Montreal painter Janet Werner gives the viewer a little of the possible contemporary utility of portraiture, both as a self-critical device and ironic examination of image making.

Walking through the exhibition at Montreal's Parisian Laundry, you accumulate a sickly discomfort that gathers mass as you move from piece to piece. Upon entry, you are confronted with two large-scale pieces. On the right, *Big girl*, 2010, is a seven-foot tall portrait of a seaside woman in a bathing suit. The belly and hips are deliberately distended and enlarged, with the subject's thumbs pulling at the sides of the bikini bottom suggestively, as if she were about to lower them for the viewer. Despite the gorgeous application of paint typical of the artist—one that promises a payoff in any event—we so wish she wouldn't.

On the wall to the left, another work of similar size, *Girl in brown suit*, 2009, is a portrait of a primly dressed woman in a brown vest, looking off into the fashion-model future with Gainsborough clouds behind her setting off her gaze. She has a huge head and clutches

a small purse demurely in front of her crotch.

The Madonna/Whore, Audrey Hepburn/Lady Gaga contrast is a minor introduction to the tweaking of the traditional idioms of portraiture that Werner has become so adept at and displays throughout the show. She is a painter's painter: her wet, slick and exact application is coupled with an attractive colour sense. The paintings are sumptuous and carefully calibrated, showing an even-tempered virtuosity. But they also use the genre of portraiture to carry the tragic-comical flourishes of self-critical content. As critic James Campbell has written of a previous exhibition in the gallery's catalogue, "Too Much Happiness," "Werner uses painterly tentativeness to underscore the fragility of her subjects." As with Goya, it's all a ruse.

The genre of portraiture has traditionally been a vehicle by which a painter could address subjects he or she finds depressing, arousing or annoying. Why that was the case can perhaps be explained by vanity: the sitter was concerned primarily with his own portrayal. In the case of both Werner and the Spanish Royals, there is indeed something wrong, even if we can't quite put our finger on it—we're too busy looking at ourselves. And of course subversive content in portraiture is that much more delicious because of it. Costume, drapery, hair and scale are all things the artist has traditionally been able to control in their own subservient universe. Werner picks up on this: a floral top becomes a mini Olitski, makeup is exploited to make a smiling face appear a ghastly mask. Distortions in the body mirror a physical concentration point: a big womb on an aroused and sexually challenging

bikini-clad figure, a huge head on the dreaming Barbie.

In *Girl with ghosty hat*, 2009, a woman looks over her naked shoulder, sporting an enormous hat. Her eyes are large, vacuous, mascara-laden disks. The hat, growing out of her head and mingling seamlessly with the sloppy articulation of hair, is a mass of Muppet creatures, Gustonesque in their colour and application. Each puppet face is as cartoonishly empty as the subject—an entertainingly lumpy mass of paint that only hints at the possibility of personality.

A more restrained piece, *After Goya*, 2009, is a study of the portrait of Duchess of Alba done by the Spanish painter in 1797. Here Werner examines the utilization of accessories more sparingly. Her excessive volume of curled hair betrays the painter's delight in the rich swirls of deep umber laid flat on the canvas. A tunic is scumbled quickly and effectively, imparting a glow to the work. Instead of the duchess's lapdog in the original Goya work, she sports a crown of vague little KKK Ookpiks—an object as ridiculously conceived as a lapdog on an otherwise dignified visage: accessory as a sort of self-defacement.

Folding woman, 2009, dissolves the figure completely, save for the pose and the clothes. Here she really is what she wears. As in *Girl with ghosty hat*, personality is vacuumed up into the swirl of composition. Throughout the exhibition, the viewer stares at the disturbing beauty of the paint as vacuously as the subject stares out from the picture plane. Werner's portraiture ultimately becomes an arena for her own painterly self-examination. As we enjoy the sumptuous mass of writhing paint adorning and

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defining each subject, we also become what she wears: empty beauty swimming in that ultimate act of vanity, painting. Who's sorry, now? ▮

"Who's Sorry Now?" was exhibited at Parisian Laundry in Montreal from March 12 to April 10, 2010.

Cameron Skene is a Montreal-based painter, writer and curator whose writing has appeared in the Montreal Gazette, Canadian Art, among others. He is currently guest curating "Dead Cat Bounce," a summer exhibition at ArtLexis in New York.