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Stephen Appleby-Barr's The Pledge

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Figuratively speaking Toronto painter Stephen Appleby-Barr's new show dazzles at the Nicholas Metivier Gallery.

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BY DAVID BALZER March 23, 2011 13:03

STEPHEN APPLEBY-BARR
To Apr 2. Tue-Sat 10am-6pm.
Nicholas Metivier Gallery, 451
King W. 416-205-9000.
MetivierGallery.com

Where can a figurative painter show in Toronto? In a city still known mostly for its conceptualists, the presence of the style, at least in its interesting forms, can often be marginal. West-end spaces such as Katharine Mulherin, Paul Petro, Clint Roenisch and LE Gallery have made a home for it, but they are small, and conducive to a certain kind of scrawly, tentative work. (A few years back, people called it "crow art.") Conversely, galleries like Diaz Contemporary and Monte

Clark, whose spacious digs are more reminiscent of those found in New York's Chelsea district, often privilege large-scale abstract or minimalist work.

The last time I'd seen paintings by 29-year-old Stephen Appleby-Barr, it was at the former kind of gallery, Narwhal Art Projects, in November 2009. Now, Appleby-Barr—who is also part of local illustration collective Team Macho—is showing at Nicholas Metivier, the prestigious two-floor King Street gallery that represents senior Canadian artists such as John Scott, Edward Burzynsky and Max Dean, as well as monumental-format landscape painters John Hartman and Peter Hoffer. This is a big deal, yet Appleby-Barr's current offering retains many of the characteristics of his previous one. The works remain fairly diminutive in size, averaging 14 by 11 inches, and the space he's been given is Metivier's back room, comparable in size to Narwhal.

Appleby-Barr has also kept up his themes and technique. His Narwhal show was called "The Invisible College," and was besotted with the surreal, the canonical and the antique, depicting anthropomorphic and human dignitaries in classical-portraiture poses (one work was a beautiful rendering of musician Owen Pallett in a frock coat) and groups of men, ostensibly members of various teams and societies, staring blankly and creepily at the viewer. (Appleby-Barr draws from daguerreotypes, one of the earliest varieties of photography, to create his paintings.) At Metivier, we get scenes like *The Pledge*, in which a group of boys, their faces scarred by swordfights, sign the titular agreement with a pointy-headed, snowman-esque gentleman between them; or *Bright Messenger*, my favourite, depicting a skater dressed like Gainsborough's Blue Boy with a horned sack on his head.

Appleby-Barr also continues to be an expert wielder of oil paint. The artist is actually relatively new to the medium, having used it incipiently for the Narwhal show, but he is accurate and subtle, especially given the speed at which he produces things. (Over half the works here are dated "2011," which, when you see them, seems somewhat superhuman.) Important for his art-historical ambitions, Appleby-Barr is also a perceptive colourist, his muted greys, browns and khakis punctuated with rich reds and creamy whites, and deepened by a thick coat of old-fashioned gloss.

A group of artists have come of age under the influence of Winnipeg's Royal Art Lodge (the '90s collective that included members Marcel Dzama, Drue Langlois and Jon Pylpchuk) and Appleby-Barr is unmistakably one of them, though many have failed to bring their work to his assured, impressive level. Metivier recently announced that Appleby-Barr's show has sold out—a vindication of sorts, further proof that allusiveness, role-playing and allegory have re-emerged for good in contemporary art, not as mere gesture, but as an expression of a certain generational craving for the flamboyant and romantic. One anticipates Appleby-Barr's work getting grander, maybe even bigger. Then, he'll really be something to contend with.

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kmulherin
Apr 3, 2011 12:07 AM

scrawly, tentative? crow art?interesting choice of words to describe our figurative painters David. Katharine Mulherin
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Narwhal
Mar 27, 2011 2:34 PM

Thanks for writing a great article on Stephen and for the Narwhal mentions. One clarification: Narwhal Art Projects is not in the past tense. We are currently closed for renovations and re-open this May 2011 with a full exhibition schedule including shows with Kris Kuksi, Freegums, Carly Walto, and Lauchie Reid along with artist talks and workshops during the summer months. Please go to www.narwhalartprojects.com for a full listing of upcoming exhibitions. While Narwhal is under renovations we've chosen to put our efforts into a fundraiser for Japan happening at the Gladstone hotel from March 31-April 5. Stephen Appleby-Barr has generously donated a drawing for the auction, event details at www.torontoheartsjapan.com.
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