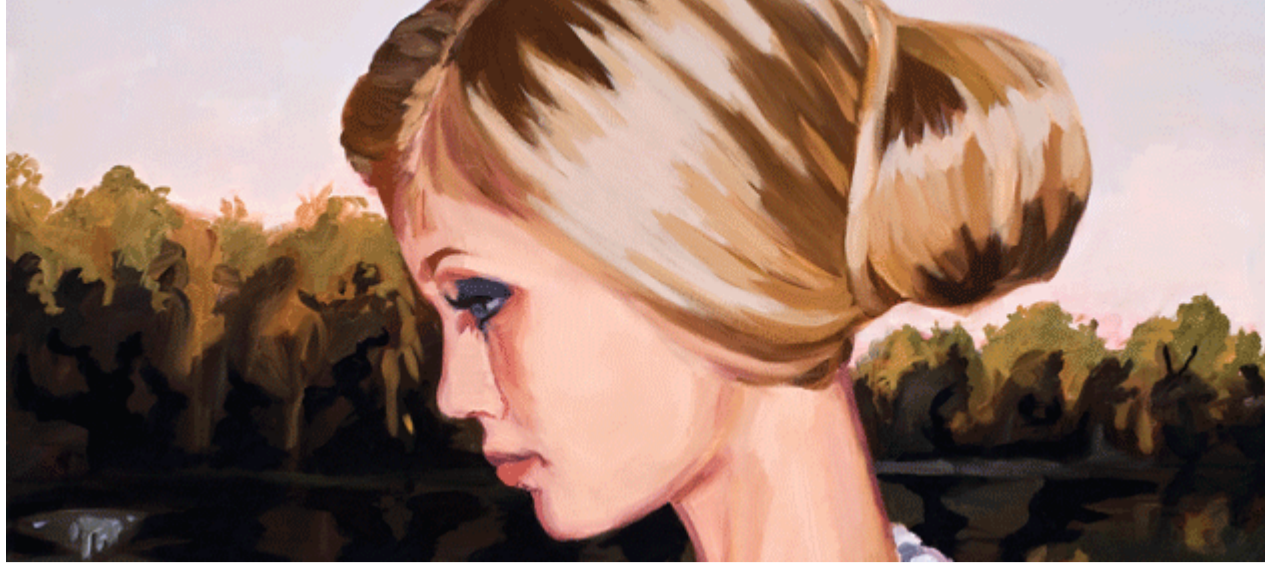


EYE CANDY



Janet Werner "New Work"

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BY DAVID BALZER November 26, 2008 09:11

EDITORIAL RATING:

Janet Werner's "New Work" runs to Dec 20. Wed-Sat 11-5pm. Birch Libralato, 129 Tecumseth. 416-365-3003. www.birchlibralato.com.

"Kitsch" is rarely a neutral word. It began, arguably, as a pejorative, pioneered by certain avant-garde tastemakers near the middle of the last century (see Clement Greenberg's 1939 essay "[Avant-Garde and Kitsch](#)"). It was a way to denigrate forms of landscape-painting and portraiture that, while being suppressed by high culture, had continued to surface as mass-produced art objects (snowglobes, Hummel figurines, Tretchikoff and Keane reproductions, etc). When said tastemakers touched these objects, they became kitsch: Dadaist readymades, in effect, signifying ironically, as placeholders for other, crasser people's ingenuoussness.

Painter Janet Werner's kitsch is of a radically different sort. For her, kitsch is acutely Kantian – Western civilization's immense, exaggerated discussion on the nature of beauty and sublimity, on all things great and small. In her last Toronto show she literally catapulted her characteristic imagery – pretty girls and their animal analogues (deer, horses, toy pets) – into space, mixing it with constellations to create some of her most challenging, abstract work to date. Her new show brings this imagery back to earth, and is in fact bluntly about the figure in the landscape. The simple, central problem of these paintings – and their absolute triumph – is the tension between subjectivity and objectivity.

The latter is a ready fixation for this critic: the symbolism of cultivated femininity juxtaposed with that of an equally cultivated nature (appropriately, the style of many of the landscapes is meant to recall paint-by-numbers). Yet thinking about these women (two of whom strongly recall Christina Ricci and Keira Knightly, their doe eyes keener than Keane's) as subjects means thinking more intently about the act of looking: and about the ways in which beauty's will is, at its root, nervous, tenuous, aggressive. In this way, Werner's kitsch is also very funny, but only because of its slightly crazed, fundamental seriousness.

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