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### Joanne Tod: "Kingdom Come" Toronto painter takes a journey through the world's museums

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BY DAVID BALZER December 09, 2009 21:12

#### EDITORIAL RATING:

Joanne Tod "Kingdom Come" runs to Dec 22. Tue-Sat 10am-6pm. Nicholas Metivier Gallery, 451 King W. 416-205-9000. [www.metiviergallery.com](http://www.metiviergallery.com).

It's no doubt been remarked upon before, but "tod" means "death" in German, and there was hardly a better name for a painter. As someone who works from photographs, Joanne Tod can be said to follow the tradition of the memento mori – a recent series consisted of headshots of Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan since 2002 – but she is also drawn to its accessory or student, vanity: some will remember her series from the early part of this decade which cast Toronto media celebrities like Leah McLaren as characters from William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*.

Tod's new show – which contains some of her best work to date, and is solidly among the top local art offerings this year – consists for the most part of views of museum pieces in venues across the West such as the British Museum and our own AGO. The show is, in fact, a superb complement to the AGO's "Tut," with its exploration of display methodology as a banal, sterilizing force as well as a semiotic minefield, in which the object is permitted to be scrutinized and celebrated uniquely. (Interestingly, Tod came out against "Tut" in one of the *Toronto Star* articles I mentioned in this column last week.)

Indeed, to read these paintings only in the former way – assuming, in addition, that Tod is condemning the institutionalization and fetishization of art – would be wrong, for there is no getting over the labour present here. (Tod is among the finest oil painters in the city, and one can appreciate not only the skilled brushwork, but also the consistency of the paint's mixing and application – she clearly works at her paintings for long periods, with athletic concentration.)

In other words, no artist could make things this beautiful with contempt as her sole motivation. What Tod does is to provide these priceless holdings with another vitrine – the painting and the painter – breathing life into what might, to our numbed contemporary eyes, have seemed dead in the flesh.

Don't forget to go to the back of the gallery to see some of Tod's new portraits, one a diptych, the other a tetraptych, and all relating, as well, to acts of visual commemoration. The tetraptych, which verges on camp and is called "Church & State," shows Oprah Winfrey, Michaëlle Jean and Michelle and Barack Obama; the diptych, "Omar Arar," shows Maher Arar and Omar Khadr; all are headshots in the style of her Afghanistan series. Tod doesn't seem to want to make statements about race and politics so much as she wants to represent well the faces that have come to stand for such statements. For a good painter, the application of style is often enough: she is a collector, a curator and an archivist, as much as she is a primary creator.

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