



## GALLERIES



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### Shelley Adler Ambivalent History

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BY DAVID BALZER March 18, 2009 21:03

#### EDITORIAL RATING:

To Apr 4, Tue-Sat 10am-6pm.  
Nicholas Metivier Gallery, 451  
King W. 416-205-9000.  
[www.metiviergallery.com](http://www.metiviergallery.com).

Shelley Adler may be a figurative painter, but she is a minimalist, a distinction that tends nowadays to be seen as contradictory or implausible. That's a dumb, ahistorical view to hold, and Adler proves 'em wrong by demonstrating that minimalism's tentative and gestural qualities can match up quite nicely with contemporary portraiture's Woolfian dedication to modes of recollection. Adler

likes faces, and in her new show uses large-format canvases frequently. It's the flipside of Chuck Close: the largeness does not magnify facial detail, but still confirms the essentially abstract quality of said detail. Actually, Adler does not see detail at all because she treats her faces like modernist landscapes – to be felt through like dance moves, in a mimicking of basic ways of looking, understanding, empathizing, acting.

Only a few of these experiments – and they do seem like experiments, apparently done fairly quickly (a shocking number of the works are dated “2009,” to the point where one wonders if it’s a mistake) – are truly successful. Adler’s most prevalent local work has been her slight retooling of Martial Raysse’s Peinture a haute tension, a chic-looking French-New-Wave-era portrait of a woman’s face whose appeal is immediate and arguably vapid; in this show, Adler’s portraits of women seem similarly blank.

Frequently they are too reminiscent of Janet Werner’s work, without that painter’s sense of fierceness and philosophy. Other works, seemingly intended to show modes of disguise, psychological or otherwise, through the application of a thin layer of paint over the subjects’ faces, are too obvious, The best works are of men, or of obscured expressions. Red Sweater’s resisting subject’s face expresses typical teenage dubiousness at being looked at, and is mirrored by the alarmingly bright red field of his sweatshirt, which resembles a theatre curtain. In another painting – a companion to the show’s still lives of a striped sweatshirt and of a table setting – an ambiguously masculine body is turned around in bed, with only the back of its head visible. Here Adler seems more open about her talent for rendering landscapes, delighting in the basic, haunting textures of the bourgeois world she paints – instead of having them reflected, more directly and less successfully, in the faces of spoiled, alienated girls or of wistful, sexy grown-ups.

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