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Portrait of a Patron: The Dukszta Collection

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BY DAVID BALZER January 27, 2010 21:01

EDITORIAL RATING:

To Mar 15. Tue-Fri noon-5pm; Sat noon-4pm. University of Toronto Art Centre, 15 King's College Circle. 416-978-1838. www.utac.toronto.ca.

"It was pleasurable," says Janusz Dukszta in an introductory video for UTAC's new show highlighting his extensive collection of portraits he commissioned of himself, amassed over 50 years. "I liked posing." And you'll like looking.

Dukszta, one of Ontario's most charismatic public figures, spent his professional life as a psychiatrist and an NDP MPP under Stephen Lewis. (Though straight himself, he was an early champion of gay rights.) In curator Gordon Hatt's estimation, he is the perfect subject for an art show: ostentatious, vain, generous, epicurean, temperamental. "Any collection of art of any quality focuses on human presence," Hatt says in the video. Dukszta's face is that presence, literally and figuratively – a sprightly, ever-changing thing, uniting a group of artists passionate about both representing and allegorizing living forms.

By commissioning these works, Dukszta became not only a patron of artists, but a patron of portraiture, an out-of-vogue art form for most of the last century. Accordingly, many of the artists here make art-historical references. A section called "Sardonic Portraits" includes sculptures by Evan Penny – a series of bronze and concrete heads – which make Dukszta into a Soviet dictator, and by Max Streicher, who constructs Dukszta's head out of wax and puts it on a silver platter.

Undoubtedly the most significant body of work is that of painter Phil Richards. Richards began a long, fruitful relationship with Dukszta in the early '70s, drawing and painting him in a variety of mythological, biblical, literary and historical contexts. A skilled technician, Richards adds high drama to Dukszta's life, often aggrandizing him with little heed for taste or trends. Dukszta, a fan of baroque and renaissance art, pushed Richards in this direction, towards major works like *Scenes from the Life of the Virgin*, an elaborate, hinged triptych that is the inarguable centerpiece of this show.

Younger viewers will learn about "ChromaZone," a group of artists who flourished on '80s Queen West: people like Oliver Girling, Andy Fabo and Tony Wilson, whose work was a reaction against the decades of minimalism and conceptualism that preceded it. Many will find these paintings more dated than Richards' deliberately anachronistic ones, though their vibrancy is incontestable. Indeed, the evident eccentricity and charisma of Dukszta always seem to produce something interesting. His ego is big enough to lock horns with, and even transcend, that of contemporary art – which, it goes without saying, is no small feat.

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