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Scott Waters: "Totems"

Local artist's pen is as mighty as his guns

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BY DAVID BALZER July 28, 2010 21:07

EDITORIAL RATING:

To Aug 1: Thursday-Sunday, noon-6pm. Le Gallery, 1183 Dundas W. 416-532-8467. www.le-gallery.ca.

"Totems" is a minor entry in the body of work of Scott Waters, the local figurative artist best known for his vivid, expertly wrought and often hallucinatory depictions of life in the military. (Waters was in the Canadian Army from 1989 to 1992.) That doesn't mean the show's not imperative: Waters' projects never fail to fascinate, not only because he is such a dazzling craftsman, but also because, as is abundantly evident in his impeccably written artist's statement, he knows exactly what he's doing. He might be Toronto's best current example of a philosopher-painter.

"Totems" is about weaponry, and the ambivalent, charged relationship Waters has to it as an aficionado of both aesthetics and combat. Like Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick*, or Winckelmann in Rome, Waters itemizes and fetishizes components of his trade, here making beautiful drawings of objects designed to kill. The focal point of the show is a series of works representing firearms and quotes from famous war films that both glorify and condemn violence: *Apocalypse Now*, *The Thin Red Line*, *RoboCop*, *Predator*, etc. In his statement (to repeat, this is a rare instance of a show that is actually illuminated by its artist's words) Waters cites Nancy Spero, Anthony Swofford and Francois Truffaut in contending that it is likely impossible to make art about war that is anti-war in any thoroughgoing way. In addition to his luscious renderings, Waters' film quotes, examples of dialogue from a genre at its most paradoxically crass and heroic (or, if you will, post-heroic), underscore this. A group of drawings on the facing wall add further, personal gloss. Dear Mom shows the component parts of a gun, all properly labelled in handwriting but for this missive, woven among the terminology: "Dear Mom, it rained today. Bullshit, that is."

Two large paintings round out the show. One, *This is This*, containing the eponymous text in white over a Tom Thomson esque landscape, is well done, but its link to the rest of the works is not readily apparent. In *Vanguard*, however, Waters pulls out all the stops, technically and conceptually. The painting is of a submarine emerging, whale-like, from the water. It is glorious, and made horrifically sublime by an accompanying panel, which looks like something you'd see in a high-school classroom, and in which Waters begrudgingly foams at the mouth about the machine's murderous capacity. The tone is funny, informed and startling. "It isn't, I suppose, what Thomas Merton intended," he says about his inclination towards pretty hate machines, "but I call it my own."

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