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Ron Terada: Who I Think I Am Vancouver's Ron Terada lands in Toronto with an exhibit that focuses on paintings of pages from the memoirs of another artist

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BY DAVID BALZER January 26, 2011 12:01

EDITORIAL RATING:
To Mar 20. Mon-Wed 11am-5pm;
Thu-Fri 11am-7pm; Sat-Sun
1pm-5pm. Justina M. Barnicke
Gallery, 7 Hart House Circle.
416-978-8398. jmbgallery.ca

Gertrude Stein's now-famous phrase denouncing the suburbs, "there's no there there," originally referred to her hometown of Oakland, California. It's been applied many times since—in Canada, often, to Vancouver, with its perceived lack of history and blessed-out citizenry. The phrase might also describe that city's contemporary art, which is internationally renowned—heavy hitters include Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Stan Douglas and Ian Wallace—and characterized by its sleek, spare and self-referential conceptualism.

Ron Terada, a younger Vancouverite who nonetheless shares these qualities, seems, on many levels, to embrace Stein's phrase as a mantra. Indeed, his new exhibit at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, arriving from the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff and, before that, from Birmingham UK's prestigious Ikon Gallery, concerns the ludicrous game of the contemporary art scene, where an awareness of art's presentation, and of the act of creativity itself, not only often defines the type of work being made, but its value in a highly competitive, cynical market.

Inevitably, some viewers will scoff at the apparent vanity of the cheekily titled, "Who I Think I Am." There is, for example, a presentation of posters for this exhibit from the two previous hosting venues. (You can take one home if you'd like.) The central focus, however—a 2010 series of paintings of pages from the memoirs of the late artist Jack Goldstein, who committed suicide in 2003—is resoundingly successful. In the '70s, Goldstein emerged from CalArts (California Institute of the Arts), an institution characterized by its relationship with art legend John Baldessari and distinguished by the "post-studio" class he taught. By the '80s, Goldstein and many of his cohorts were grappling with a fickle art market, largely based in New York and ever-ready to spit out what it had quickly chewed up. Goldstein himself eventually went MIA, became a heroin addict, and re-emerged over a decade later with a memoir and some new work, only to off himself shortly afterward.

Terada's paintings are precise acrylic renderings of lines of text from that memoir. The writing itself is the authentic content here: shocking, silly and vain, while also legitimately angry and heartbreaking. As a presenter of this content, though, Terada hits a nerve. The paintings—white text on black—will, for many, recall On Kawara, the celebrated Japanese minimalist who, in the same style, paints dates on canvases, marking their completion. Kawara's act is often perceived as existential, even heroic. Disturbingly, Terada reveals something else, a curiosity of one contemporary artist for another, coloured with ambition and horror, reverence and ridicule. It could be a tombstone; it could also be cannibalism.

Other pieces in "Who I Think I Am" do the job more lightly. Older paintings reproduce ads from Artforum. Entering the City of Vancouver is a photograph of a book about Vancouver art. Throughout, one feels Terada's best skill is pointing at things—a classic conceptual move that Baldessari arguably coined, and which Terada depressingly cultivates and updates. Baldessari's finger seemed, still, to wonder about a there being there. Terada's thinks it knows better, and moves with ironic, inward-turning flair.

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