

BORDERCROSSINGS

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VISUAL ART

Jay Isaac

by Earl Miller



A painter's painter is a rare peacock in the grey forest of cool theory and ethical puritanism that is the Toronto art scene. Jay Isaac is one of these fortunate exceptions. Even among a small group of local painters coming of age in the 1990s he is often associated with (Andre Ethier, Brad Phillips and the late Chris Rogers), Isaac stands out for his non-wavering commitment to painting, demonstrated through honed academic skill and formidable art historic knowledge. His recent exhibition "High Gloss Ceilings," comprised of nine small acrylic paintings (28 x 22 or 30 x 24 inches), all from 2017, is significant for its turn to the overtly figurative from his comparatively abstract works painted from 2010 to 2017. Isaac has not made an about-face, though: abstraction remains, but in combination with a surrealist-tinted figure-centred imagism. His move towards figuration from abstraction matches that of the global art world over the past several years—a paradigm shift from abstract painters such as Jacob

Kassay, Lucien Smith and Laura Owens to figurative painters such as Kerry James Marshall, Dana Shutz and Nina Chanel Abney. Yet, I detect personal rather than movement-based motivations behind Isaac's progression.

In fact, the exhibition title refers to his past work as a house painter, a straight-up highlighting of this exhibition as autobiographical—at least in part. That title also hints that the show holds comedic overtones, since the notion of "high-gloss ceilings," a deliberately unflattering design choice, satirizes tasteful bourgeois home decorating. High-gloss ceilings, unlike the conventional matte painted ones, cause garish distracting reflections. Isaac even maintains a mock business website offering this undesirable service, a discrete side project that is only abstractly connected to the exhibition. Nonetheless, a loose abstract connection makes for an effective titling of this show, as Isaac's eccentric, absurdist imagery is best interpreted not by seeking overall articulated themes but by delighting in an engaging range of autonomous references.

Isaac sources his eclectic imagery from both personal experience and art history. For example, *Removing the Stone of Madness, After* nods to Hieronymus Bosch's *The Extraction of the Stone of Madness*, 1494, via a close-up outline portrait of the man being operated on in the original painting. Meanwhile, another eponymous painting, *Ualrlife*, resembling a book cover, displays the cryptic text "Ualrlife," the cut-off title of an imaginary novel, *Sensual Hell and Afterlife*, that the artist pretended to have authored. Isaac coheres these disparate references formally. The paintings, initially destined to be silkscreens, bear common stylistic features designed to perform effectively in that print-making medium. Blunt, often black, outlines and discrete colour blocks do translate successfully to paint, granting the compositions graphic directness and flatness. This print-making influence is particularly explicit in *School for Creative Anarchy* with its grey and black lines that shape and enclose monochromatic blue, pink and white loosely organic abstract forms.

The notion of a school for anarchy is absurdly paradoxical. And absurdist humour, which in Isaac's current paintings could be deemed stoner surrealism for its mix of the hallucinogenic and the ludicrous, further unifies the exhibition. Consider how the flaccid ghostly figure in *Downtown Dick, After Georgia O'Keefe* flops over the New York City skyline like a rejected Macy's parade float. Despite its deflated state, it shows off disproportionately large male genitals. It is powerless yet boastful. Then consider *Crass Delirium 22*, in which a tiny man mounts the back of a giant grasshopper, a proportion switch that could read as a reversal of the conventional human/insect

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"The Sunshine Eaters"

by Anna Kovler

power dynamic. In contrast to this silly cartoon, *Bad Apple* is laugh-out-loud hilarious. A portrait of a man bearing an evil smile marks the side of an apple and stands as a perfect illustration of the ridiculousness of visualizing an idiom ("bad apple") literally.

Another solid link between works is a visible dedication to the painterly, a commitment ultimately characterizing Isaac's career. In this exhibition you see a richness of colour, a Baroque dark-light contrast and a confident economy of brush stroke. Take, for instance, *Energy Equation with Spectre*, a front-and-centre depiction of a lightbulb, a cliché if there ever was one. Other than a few rapid sketch lines and a mischievous white spectre inexplicably placed in the lightbulb's centre, very little light emanates from this light source. Black, vaguely figurative shapes surround it; even the mustard yellow and burgundies in the background reveal black underpainting. Serious painting underlies the irony. Isaac has abstracted the bulb to rescue it from a fate of triteness, rendering it adroitly with resonant steel blue tones and white flourishing highlights. The painting resembles more a Picasso mandolin than a pedestrian lightbulb. In *Energy Equation with Spectre* you witness Isaac's painting at its best: a balancing of the knowingly ironical with the sincerely traditional. ■

"High Gloss Ceilings" was exhibited at Cooper Cole Gallery, Toronto, in December 2017.

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When I sat down to talk with curator Lisa Deanne Smith about her exhibition "The Sunshine Eaters" at the new Onsite Gallery at OCADU, she spoke about being drawn to artwork that is multi-sensorial. I noted that some of the works in the show were merely visual, which prompted her to describe a bodily reaction she experienced in response to those artworks. It was as though in that moment she was being pulled out of herself. Towards what, exactly, was unclear, but this lack of clarity in the process of leaving one's self, and the risk involved in acts of boundary crossing, saturated my experience and thoughts about the exhibition.

Despite the seemingly common-sense fact that humans are constantly swallowing and assimilating food, and therefore are intertwined with their environment on every level, there persists a notion of possible independence, containment, and therefore security. It's a fantasy propagated politically as much as biologically to make possible, among other consequences, exclusionary immigration policies, wall building and environmental damage. In the fantasy of security, the prospect of reaching out toward another can stir the same fears as the possibility of intrusion: things can travel both ways across porous membranes, with unpredictable results.

"The Sunshine Eaters" embodies porosity not only in its individual works, but also in the wide range of artists and the ages, nationalities and career levels represented. This variety puts the 12-artist exhibition closer to a curated section of an international biennial than the typical group shows at commercial galleries or museums. Seeing emerging Toronto artists Winnie Truong and



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Jessica Karuhanga alongside Nick Cave and prolific documentarian Alanis Obomsawin gave a sense of continuity and cohesion to their very diverse practices, materials and preoccupations. In each of their works the boundaries and tensions between the individual and their environment are the locus of interrogation.

Entering the gallery, I immediately noticed a floral scent, and the sound of melodic incantation carried forward from Karuhanga's video at the back of the space. The perfume emanated from two white pod-like enclosures arcing outward from the wall, housing Nina Leo and Moez Surani's *Heresies*, 2018, a line of custom scents. Inside each pair of arcs, a clear bottle was affixed to a white shelf with a few centimetres of pale yellow perfume eliciting the intimate experience of leaning into the bottle to smell the contents.

Leo and Surani asked professional perfumers who live in certain places of trauma to create a scent that represents that place to them. Joel Wilson, a perfumer from Texas, created an enveloping warm vanilla scent titled *My Waco*. Perfumer Kayo Yoneda, who grew up in Hiroshima, created *My Hiroshima*, a bright floral citrus scent. For many, thinking about the word "Hiroshima" might bring to mind fire, ash and death rather than the fresh, lemongrassy perfume representing it here.

1. Nina Leo and Moez Surani, *Heresies*, 2018, a line of custom scents.

2. Winnie Truong, *Quick Release*, 2017, coloured pencils and paper collage, 32 x 24 inches framed. Courtesy of the artist and Erin Stump Projects, Toronto.