

Art works dive head first into eroticism

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Elegant pictures of undressed women always make me nervous. With our rich history of chauvinist wolf-whistling, reducing women to pure flesh is a risky business. But what about the opposite — can we safely ogle a posse of tight male behinds? Enthroned above their glass ceiling, maybe men can afford to shed their full humanity for a while and become tempting bits of bod. That seems to be one of the arguments made in a new series of works by Jennifer Walton, a 36-year-old painter from Kingston, Ont. now showing at Toronto's Edward Day Gallery.

In a suite of 15 lusciously painted oils, each exactly two feet square, Walton gives us every possible take on a fetching young man diving naked into wild waters. Bright sun on rippling waves; dull overcast above gentle swells; flying cloud reflected in white-capped chop — changes rung on sun and sea, with each time a tautly human form suspended above just waiting to make impact.

Backs ripple and buns knot as this flock of outstretched bodies takes flight into the surge. And whatever your sexual preferences, you'd have to be a saint — or at least a severely repressed macho-

ART REVIEW

A series of paintings by a female artist makes for an unusually straightforward celebration of undressed males caressed by naked nature.

man — not to get a charge out of all this plummeting guy-flesh. (But male viewers might not want to think too hard about what happens when all those unprotected fronts touch down.) The erotic equation of these pictures may not be very subtle — raw nature plus raw flesh equals raw sex — but there's a special pleasure in seeing a woman doing the addition. Or maybe the pleasure simply comes from this show's unusually straightforward celebration of undressed males caressed by naked nature, regardless of the painter's gender.

But the celebration on these gallery walls isn't just about Walton's sexy subjects. Her beautifully laddled-on oil paint is as charged as what it depicts.

Ask Walton's dealers, and they'll tell you that these pictures are based on photographs of the artist's husband, snapped during 17 dives into cold October water. (He couldn't have been caught in mid-flight without a camera's help.) But unlike most high realism, Walton's paintings really do manage to transcend their photographic source.

You don't admire them for how much they look like reality, or like a photo — old-hat technical tricks hardly worth a yawn — you admire them for how much extra meaning they get from being painted surfaces. And this isn't exactly commonplace these days. On the few occasions when you see thickly painted oils, they're usually applied in a generically expressionist lather, the pictorial equivalent of inarticulate chatter. But Walton, working in a tradition that dates back at least to Titian and Renaissance Venice, works her paint and reworks it until it speaks eloquently about what it shows.

Walton's thick dabs of paint make for wetter, more luscious waves than any snapshot can achieve. Her extra glossy varnish, twinkling in the gallery's spots, calls up the dazzle of a bright day by the water. Her painting of flesh isn't just uniformly fleshy, making tactile paint a trite metaphor for touchable body: Walton's overcast divers are painted with soft, caressing strokes, while brightly lit ones are thick with dabbed-on highlights

over solid, dense shadow.

And sometimes, Walton lets her paint leave truth-to-nature entirely behind. In a few of these pictures, Walton's diving husband casts a black shadow onto the water below him. With the help of an overloaded brush, the artist makes this shadow break away from the smoothly painted waves around it, so that it becomes a writhing monster, a screaming form straight out of Munch. And that subtle touch gives the lie to the too-bracing pleasures of this show, and makes it clear that even naked man alone in nature is haunted by the artifice of culture.

Jennifer Walton is at the Edward Day Gallery, 33 Hazelton Ave., until April 4.



A detail from one of Jennifer Walton's 15 paintings: An erotic equation of raw nature plus raw flesh equaling raw sex.