



Eminent Victorian

SANDRA MEIGS and the sculpture of painting

BY SARAH MILROY

OPPOSITE: with Mister Whistler
[detail from *The Fold Heads*] 2009
Acrylic on panel, mixed media,
gobo light 8 paintings; overall
dimensions variable

BELOW: *In the Highest Room* 2009
Acrylic on linen 1.95 x 2.33 m



One of the problems besetting painting over the past century or so has been this: when does a painting start being a sculpture? Pure opticality (painting's purview) and somatic engagement (sculpture's thing) would seem to be at odds, but some artists have a knack for bridging that gap and bringing it all together. Which brings us to Sandra Meigs, a mid-career Canadian artist who lives and works in Victoria, B.C., and her new body of work, *The Fold Heads*, which was shown at Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto last winter. Precisely poised between painting and sculpture, this series of works teases out the particular capacities of each medium, coupling them in quirky cross-pollination.

Take *Babe* (*Fold Heads outcast*), for example. A squarish white canvas with a little horizontal shelf jutting out at a 90-degree angle from its lower edge, it carries two widely spaced blue eye-like marks up top, with a length of blue silk gauze falling from what looks like the mouth. Call it comic minimalism. Despite her

humble physical properties, *Babe* exudes Grace Kelly appeal—that wide, pillowy brow, that debutante blue, that graceful, semi-transparent spill to the floor like an elegant exhalation. This is innocence calling out for a convertible and the Côte d'Azur, beauty primed for vestal martyrdom.

When questioned about *Babe's* outcast status (this work was displayed in the office at Susan Hobbs rather than in the main gallery space), Meigs says, "Maybe she was just too balanced to fit in with the others." She's the only one with right angles; a little too pure, a little too fully frontal, perhaps, to fit in. "Maybe I like her too much," Meigs adds. "I think of her as very expressive, with that big flow of fluff coming from her mouth. She's definitely communicating, but I don't know if I'd say she's happy."

Babe is one of nine distinct personalities that Meigs has conjured from the merest of materials. She had a system. First, she developed the series of shaped white canvases, deciding on their forms by

experimenting with folded paper prototypes. "I wanted to explore how painting could explode out of the frame," she says, "to get out into that space between the viewer and the picture plane."

Yet Meigs permitted herself no forward planning about how a human face might take shape. "I sat in front of each one for a long time," she says, "and I got to know its form and its possibilities." Finally, and decisively, she would make her mark. "I had a rule: once I made an action onto the form, I couldn't undo it." No revisions.

Colour, too, was restricted: she picked one colour per *Fold Head*, with the fabric elements soaked in pigment to match the paint on the canvas. Each piece incorporates its own distinctive textile; the materials range from cheesecloth to organza, knitted mohair and linen. Finally, to support the fabric elements, she chose a specific gauge of piano wire. "As with the fabric," she says, "you get very involved in interpreting its behaviour when you use it enough." One fabric, one shape, one wire, one episode of painting. One shot.

While the results may appear simple, the degree of character revelation through form comes as a delightful shock. Meigs describes *Ever So*, for example, as "a blond with a flippy thing going on," alluding to the hank of yellow cloth that falls from the painting's lower left edge. (The title comes from "something Marilyn Monroe said in *How to Marry a Millionaire*," says Meigs.) The profile of *Gotta Go* culminates in a bloodied scarf dangling from a long sloping nose, its diagonal arch redolent of snobbery. In *Feelin' Lo*, the canvas support is folded vertically like a book. "I saw that angle as being like a complete container," she says. "It's so shut in on itself that it becomes something melancholy." The colour choice blossomed from that. "Purple," she says, "is inherently mournful." Two long pieces of fabric extend to the floor: lavender lamentation, *gravitas* through gravity.

Meigs is known for her eclectic influences—country-and-western hurrin' songs, movies, children's television, opera—but the art-historical backstory is also dense, with Meigs surveying painting's history with characteristic eccentricity. In Manet's full-length portraits, she says, "there's a built-in sense of tragedy to our experience. You want to meet the person, but you are kind of thrown out of that possibility," with the painter underscoring the artifice by suspending his subjects in a blank, fictive space. "He draws you in because the figures are very convincing spatially, but he also brings your attention to the surface, to the details, like the fall of a hanky," evoked through the daubing of paint on canvas. The result is patently shorthand, and we're meant to notice.

The American minimalist Richard Tuttle is another inspiration. She recalls a show of his work in a Chelsea gallery in 2003: small-scale foam-core assemblages that seemed thrown together at odd angles jutting out from the wall. "He uses intuition that's full of content," says Meigs.



"I admire that they contained so much in every gesture and decision."

Decisive, too, was the influence of an artwork made by Meigs's now 17-year-old daughter Evelyn back in her preschool days. She had painted a piece of 8 ½-by-11-inch paper bright canary yellow, appending to it yellow crepe paper and a swatch of yellow cellophane that travels off the edge of the paper sheet and into space. "I've kept that for 15 years," Meigs says, delighted by it still. "It had that intuitive flair. It looked like a body with two arms hanging out and a leg—but it's about as simple and direct as it can be. Just white and yellow. She knew exactly what she was doing. I think that's something to aspire to."

With their gonzo appeal to the senses, the *Fold Heads* pack a surprising punch, and in this they take their place in a Victoria tradition that is just starting to

gel for the history books. Anchored by the example of Mowry Baden (whose experimentation with art and perceptual theory has yielded a lifetime of intriguing interactive sculptures) and the late Roland Brener (who started out a British-trained modernist and ended up a postmodern punster), the leading artists formerly and currently centred on the University of Victoria are part of an emerging tradition that challenges the pure visuality of Vancouver's photoconceptualists. These works hit you first in the gut; then the mind scrambles to compute.

The American-Canadian artist Jessica Stockholder, who has long headed the graduate department in sculpture at Yale and is acclaimed internationally for her epic combinations of paint, hardware supplies and other consumer products, was trained in Victoria. The Los Angeles sculptor Charles Ray, who studied in Victoria with Brener and made his name in the 1980s with figurative sculptures involving often-dramatic dislocations of bodily scale, is another notable alumnus. The Toronto artist Kim Adams, also a U Vic alumnus, creates sculptural mayhem from the Home Hardware lexicon in sculptures by turns miniature and gargantuan (he's been known to make art out of cut-up minivans), and Luanne Martineau, who currently teaches alongside Meigs at the University of Victoria, explodes and reconfigures the human body in her comic/grotesque felt sculptures, which call up human anatomy, utopian architecture and the oddball history of cartooning—a dissident iconographic stew.

Maybe Victoria is just quiet enough that the body can make itself felt, and just far enough off the art-world grid to offer an ideal space for experimentation and vibrant idiosyncrasy. In B.C. art, the Vancouver sculptor Liz Magor would seem to be the principal outlier to this Vancouver/Victoria schema: her sculptural replicas evoke strong bodily reactions that, in turn, prompt philosophical speculation. "But she's an island girl isn't she," says Meigs, referring to Magor's long-established summers on Cortes Island, atop the Strait of Georgia. "We're willing to claim her as one of our own." ■

OPPOSITE: Sandra Meigs in her
Victoria studio, March, 2010
PHOTO BRUCE WILKIN

RIGHT: **Feelin' Lo** (detail from *The
Fold Heads*) 2009 Acrylic on panel,
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