

A puppet show that veers into tragedy

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GALLERY GOING



Sandra Meigs' paintings push the faces of her characters pretty close to pure abstraction.

SANDRA MEIGS AT SUSAN HOBBS

"I think of them as very funny," says Sandra Meigs, on the phone from her studio in Victoria, B.C. "Funny, and theatrical as well...a sort of cast of characters." She's referring to the eight portrait-sized paintings called *The Fold Heads*, making up her new exhibition at Toronto's Susan Hobbs Gallery.

The *Fold Heads* seem pretty sketchy at first—apparently simple, wall-mounted constructions with occasional squares and rectangles of thinly-painted colour placed here and there, sometimes enlivened by the addition of rudimentary props. The series name is derived from Meigs' having come to the final form of the works by first making paper models of them.

Gotta Go, for example, looks a bit like a blocky white T-shirt cut roughly from board, with one rigid sleeve painted red. A handkerchief-like swatch of red silk gauze (of the same red) hangs at the end of the opposite sleeve—as if the wearer were just about to drop it coyly and expect it to be picked up. Or, more urgently, as if the

character were bleeding profusely from one arm. And the mordant, rather smirky *Hey Yo* is basically a large, simple T-shaped form in white, with two enormous, fringy fake eyelashes, each about a foot long, both modestly lowered on either side of the central nose-like rectangle. What *abashment* there is here, considering we're only looking at a piece of white wood and two big half-moon eyelashes affixed to it!

Sometimes, as with *Ever So* (shown here), she pushes the face-ness of her cast of characters pretty close to pure abstraction. Here, for example, there are some swatches of yellow on the white board and a single piece of yellow cloth dangling down at the left of the piece. I leave it to you to find the Fold Head.

Central to Meigs' procedure is the idea of pareidolia—which, Wikipedia will tell you, is from the Greek, "para" (with, alongside of) and "eidolon" (image, form, shape).

Pareidolia is that curious psychological phenomenon by which "a vague and random stimulus" is perceived as significant (seeing faces in clouds, identifying the man in the moon, finding a saint's face on a piece of rock, hearing messages in recordings played in reverse, and so on). It also comes into play in the way infants seem programmed to read the simplest visual configurations (two eye-like things, a third, mouth-like mark) as a human face.

Meigs asks us to be infants again—but only that initial, pareidolian way. She provides us with barely enough anatomical help and then dances away.

For me, Meigs has constructed a sort of rough-hewn commedia dell'arte. Which means lots of knockabout play, lots of stylized overwrought emotion—and a whiff of tragedy.