



R.M. Vaughan: The Exhibitionist

Stripped right down to the peek-a-boo

Shirley Wiitasalo at Susan Hobbs Gallery

If Shirley Wiitasalo ever decides to give up the painting racket, she could make a killing in burlesque. Wiitasalo is a sultry mistress of the art of peek-a-boo.

Her latest suite of acrylics on canvas at Susan Hobbs Gallery alternate between lush washes of colour and pattern and ethereal swipes of obscuring neutrals, creating a sensual, almost decadent tension.

This dance of absence and presence, bold and shy, is created, I was informed, by a “transfer process.” Appropriately enough, that was all the information the artist, via her gallerist, was willing to divulge. My guess is that Wiitasalo applies screens, fabrics and stencils to her canvases, makes marks with a roller or perhaps aerosols, and then goes at the patterns like a home renovator stripping old wallpaper, wiping off all but the faintest traces, the best bits.

The effect is entrancing. You very quickly begin to look for more, to scan the paintings for secreted information, whispers of pigment and line.

Of course, Wiitasalo could be working in the opposite direction – faintly applying her patternmakers to plain, uniform surfaces. But that’s half the fun, trying to figure out which layer came first – the Popsicle-orange ribbons or the bleached cream? The delicate lace or the bullheaded roller? The satiny folds or the denim dye?

Even with all the obvious calculation going on here, these works are far from clinical. While one could make much academic noise about painterly archaeologies, the artist as erased subject, or the psychological consequences of the paintings’ evident mistrust of the definitive, what really strikes (and stays with) the viewer is the muted riot beneath and between all the lovely veils.

The Globe and Mail, Saturday May 29, 2010