

Photographer defies view of art as timeless

Gilbert Bouchard



PREVIEW

Chantal Gervais' Without End

Showing at: Harcourt House Gallery, third floor, 10215 112th St.
Until: Aug. 26

Alluring and shocking are apt descriptions of *Without End*, Chantal Gervais' exhibit of photographic nudes on display at Harcourt House Gallery.

Eschewing the typically young and flawless models you see in fashion ads, billboard advertising and fine-art nude figure drawings and paintings, the Ottawa-based artist creates esthetically appealing images of people with serious-looking scars as well as the visible ravages of age.

"I like to explore the unpredictable nature of the human body and I have a problem with the fact that so many images ... are idolized and commercialized. All these images of the idealized body we see end up distancing ourselves from our bodies," she says of her glossy and large-scale nudes.

Gervais wants her work to be equally "seductive and disturbing," referencing Renaissance painting and high-fashion nudes, while at the same time visually reminding us of images we've seen from morgues and laboratories.

"I borrow these painting references be-

Exhibit focuses on the human body in transformation



OLIVIA KACHMAN, THE JOURNAL

Chantal Gervais with triptych *Untitled #5* from the *Without End* exhibit at Harcourt House Gallery

cause they have trained us to look at the body," she says.

The artist sees herself endeavouring to create a body of work that goes against default visual constructions that can be painfully superficial. For example, says

Gervais, the idealized figure on a billboard advertisement is all about the surface, but so is the documentary image of an older model or a person with transformative marks.

"It's important for me to be creating a

more fictional reality and not a documentary reality in these images in that the documentary image typically focuses on the surface of the body," she says.

"I'm shifting images here to show peo-

ple in a physical transformation while not rendering the images in an erotic or a monstrous fashion."

To that end it's important to note the high level of "corporeality" in Gervais' work, depicting people who are undeniably physical beings living in a deeply sensational (maybe even painful), vulnerable and unpredictable reality. Her aim is to both express something "very real about the body," as well as not separate the person depicted in her images from their illness or condition.

"I'm drawing with light to let us see the whole being."

More than just exploring the nature of subject matter and different ideals of human beauty, Gervais is questioning the idea of how time and space is addressed in photography in this body of work.

The three largest works on display are triptychs (three-panel pictures) featuring slightly different poses from one panel to the next. While subtle shifts, these change in her subject's poses make the viewer highly aware of how physical an action it is to scan over an image.

As well, Gervais' work flies in the face of the myth of art being "timeless" by making the viewer realize that the scanning process one uses to look across her disjointed work is a physical process that takes a certain amount of time (albeit a slice of time measured in fractions of a second) and is encompassing a body that itself is also living in time, even if that time is only the time it takes to turn over on your side.

"By breaking up these images the way I do, I make you break your gaze and make you realize that the body is only ever unified visually in a very short and specific moment in time."