

# Contradictions on canvas

The Globe and Mail By SARAH MILROY  
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Victoria artist Sandra Meigs is one of the Canadian art world's most intriguing creatures. Her paintings seem to defy description (though I'll try in a minute), and no exhibition of her art looks like the one that came before it. As well, her art is built from contradictions.

The paintings are funny, antic things, and yet they carry an aftertaste of sadness. At times, they dare to be ugly, yet they seduce you with their charm. They look like child's play, but they grapple with grown-up stuff. They are learned, and then they are colloquial. (In her current show, for example, she drew inspiration from Henri Matisse, Ellsworth Kelly, outsider artist Adolf Wolfli, and the late country singer Johnny Cash.)

When you meet her, as I did again last week before the opening of her show at the Susan Hobbs Gallery, the paradoxes just keep on coming. At 51, Meigs comes across as a no-nonsense Rosie the Riveter type (on the day we met, she was wearing a paint-spattered, dark blue work shirt and trousers), but her voice is baby-girl soft. Her eyes, too, are startlingly tender, and when she talks about art, they light up.

"I wanted you to walk into the gallery and see these splats of colour, like somebody coughed all over the place with paint," she said to me in her slightly ungainly way, and indeed the pictures do have that feeling of spontaneous regurgitation. (In fact, they are carefully worked up from pencil sketches.)

One large vertical painting depicts a giant green clown, his head tipped sharply to one side. One upturned boot swells nightmarishly while the other shrivels away.

Another painting shows a girl restraining a brace of geese, their necks slumped over in a spent swoon. When I mentioned the myth of Leda and the swan, that archetypal tale of plundering male lust and female erotic abandon, Meigs smiled before turning contemplative. The tables here are turned, she pointed out. "I find this a sad one," she said. "I really see her as trying to get them up, but they're just not responding."

Somehow, with its curving arabesques and goofy, grotesque distortions, the picture feels both innocent and ribald at the same time.

One of the subtler dramas played out in these new works is the relationship between figure and ground, a fundamental formal issue that besets any artist making a painting. Here, the negative spaces – the white areas – are far from neutral. They are shockingly alive.

In one celadon green and white painting titled *Girl Kissing Horse*, a host of slippery white-on-white characters animate the presumed-to-be-empty places: a stylized foot, a naked lady, a zygote and a penis, which thrusts its way into the gap of the horse's open mouth – a subtle phallic figment that, like the other background figures, evades detection at first glance.

These paintings are a far cry from the crisp and handsome abstractions of Ellsworth Kelly, which she studied during her recent four-month sojourn in New York. (Meigs was awarded a residency in the Canada Council's artist's studio last year.) "That time was just so important," she said, "just to have the time to look."

Indeed, the ghosts of a number of 20th-century giants can be found in her new pictures. *Squashed Clown: Brown* will ring a bell for anyone well versed in American abstraction. The painting feels like a grotesquely comic reprise of a classic Robert Motherwell *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* painting, featuring kindred big blooming shapes and a distinctive milk-chocolate brown favoured by the legendary American modernist.

"There's definitely some kind of sixties nostalgia thing going on here," Meigs said, stepping back to wonder at it all. "You paint something and then you say, 'God that looks familiar to me. I think I've seen that somewhere.' That happens a lot when you make art."

Sandra Meigs continues at the Susan Hobbs Gallery until Dec. 18. 137 Tecumseth St., 416-504-3699.