



Secrets harboured, faces revealed

by GARY MICHAEL DAULT
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Sandra Meigs at Susan Hobbs Gallery

Sandra Meigs, whose new exhibition, *Scenes for my Affection*, opened on Thursday at Toronto's Susan Hobbs Gallery, makes paintings that are simultaneously difficult and delightful—which is as sweetly disconcerting as it is troublingly enjoyable.

The exhibition consists of the following works: one gigantic grey interior (76" x 120"), wherein both the walls and the mystical staircases throng with human faces, three strange little untitled paintings which, like the one reproduced here, are enhanced by inserts of electric light (this one offers three slots of white light, while the other two employ, respectively, red light and a light that blinks), and a suite of six paintings, each an interior painted (shades of Matisse) in what is primarily one colour—burnt orange, purple, blue, bright orange, turquoise and red.

Meigs, who made her first reputation as a painter in Toronto and has now been living in Victoria, B.C. for the past fourteen years (she teaches at the University of Victoria) is remarkably and refreshingly cavalier about additions and extensions to her paintings: almost all of them feature some peculiar add-on or other. The burnt-orange interior, for example, has a slab of bright yellow "roof" jutting out horizontally above it. The small turquoise interior has three stoppered plastic spigots sprouting aggressively from it, right into the viewer's face. The small blue and red interiors have clear glass bubbles affixed to their surfaces—an oddly magical effect. And, as previously mentioned, three of the other paintings offer electric light. In addition, almost all of the paintings possess peripheral flanges made either of lighting gel or of silver Mylar. The paintings, then, are highly "impure."

But what are they about? Well, that's a tough one. They certainly seem to harbour secrets. In the painting reproduced here, the ostensible "subject" of the picture appears to be a chair with a green slipcover, upon which nestles a girl or woman in green socks—who is, in turn, almost entirely draped in a wine-dark coverlet (you can still see her feet).

But Meigs wants us to notice, in addition, that there is another presence in the painting—represented by the three slots of bright electric light. For Meigs (and hopefully for us, too), the two vertical bars of light and the horizontal one beneath it, constitute a rudimentary but powerful face (two "eyes" and a "mouth"). There are "minor characters" (like the sleeping girl with the feet) in each of the paintings, Meigs told me, as we sat amidst her newly hung works, "but the major character is the painting itself—with a face imbedded in it."

Sometimes the imbedded face is electric, as it is here. Sometimes, it is suggested by the glass balls or spigots that bedeck the pictures. However this "face" is produced, it represents the "inner self" of the painting, and that is what matters to Meigs. The purpose, therefore, of the electric fixtures, the glass balls and the spigots, she says, "is to grab the viewer's self."

What happens to the "viewer's self" after it is grabbed? That's one of the refreshing things about the work of this complex but almost eerily aloof artist: what happens to the "viewer's self" is all up to the viewer. "I want complete freedom for the viewer," Meigs says. And thus does Sandra Meigs, who makes exceedingly, disturbingly original paintings, offer us a freedom to which (to use Jean-Paul Sartre's phrase) we are all "condemned."

Prices on request. Until December 15. 137 Tecumseth Street. 416-504-3699.