

R.M. VAUGHAN: THE EXHIBITIONIST

Stev'nn Hall's landscapes are a kick in the head



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Stev'nn Hall at Muse Gallery *_Until July 7, 1230 Yonge St., Toronto;*

www.musegallery.ca

Artists are an unpredictable lot.

The last collection of works by Toronto-based multimedia artist Stev'nn Hall that I stared down was a series of portraits of sexy tough guys who looked like they had just attended their first, and not very successful, mixed martial arts class. Simultaneously confrontational and seductive, the works required you to either glare back or walk away. And, they sold better than porn. You'll never go broke making art about attractive people.

Now, at Muse Gallery, Hall has reinvented himself as a romantic landscape artist. But, despite my love of all things "rough trade," I do not miss the previous works. Hall brings the same turbulent beauty to his images of storm clouds and twisted trees that he brought to hunky bruisers. Was it Stevie Nicks who sang "I have always been a storm"?

In these new works Hall's technique rewards close study.

First, he photographs his landscapes – primarily lakes at sunrise/sunset, lakes overshadowed by bulky blankets of cotton-ball clouds. Then he scratches, folds, bends and otherwise messes with the photo-prints. Where it strikes him to add even more drama to his beachside *sturm und drang*, Hall works layers of paint, in off-kilter colours such as stop-light green, bubblegum pink and a heavenly, glaze-clear blue that reminds me of a husky's opal iris, or a cocktail made with curaçao.

Finally, Hall shellacs the treated photos with an evident, but not too thick (and never messy), layer of clear varnish giving the images not only a glistening surface, but also a kind of remoteness – an intentional artificiality that runs counter to traditional ideas of landscape art, wherein the artist sets out to replicate nature truthfully.

Nature, Hall appears to be arguing, can be glamorous and as hot-rod charged as any sleek machine. Or, perhaps he is showing us that underneath nature's superficial chaos, a very well-oiled machine churns away, as Newton famously proposed. But in order to see the dynamism, the glistening gears and electricity that make storms rage and flowers grow, we need to filter nature through a reality we can more easily process – namely, art.

The eternal nurture/nature question is answered in Hall's works with a non-answer, with hybridity instead of stance-taking. He approached the artist's position in nature-based art not as an either/or situation to be fixed, but rather as a both/neither proposition to be explored, left open-ended – which explains his fascination with cloud formations, floating swirls of water and dust in constant flux.

Hall's new works, pretty as (shredded) postcards, are still a kick in the head.