

Stev'nn Hall's Skylight delight

Artist's new show features stunning autumnal landscapes

Ryan Kerr



Stev'nn Hall's *Never Forever* is part of his new show *Skylight* at Muse Gallery in Toronto.

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Artist Stev'nn Hall's series of stunning landscape photographs, artfully over-painted in rich, bright colours, provides a perfect respite from the darkening autumn nights. Which is why *Skylight*, now showing at Muse Gallery in Toronto, is worth visiting.

Raised in Johnstown, Ontario — a town with “a motel, church and a gas station . . . and that's about it,” he says — Hall spent most of his artistic life in the Big Smoke oscillating between painting, photography or some combination of the two. He is fascinated by the tension between perceived notions of beauty and immediate, visceral conflict represented or implied in the same image.

In a previous photo series, *Against Himself*, Hall masterfully expresses risk as well as vulnerability using photocollage duplicates of the same (sexy) man, interacting, fighting or threatening himself.

With *Skylight*, Hall shifts his attention to landscapes rather than human subjects. Despite the calmer subject matter, at second glance the images reveal the sense of threat and suspense familiar from Hall's other works.

Photographs of sunny, tree-lined fields or endless cloudy skies are blended with an almost unnervingly cheery palette and enlarged to overwhelming scale. Standing in front of one is engrossing — aggressively present and intimidating. For those of us who grew up queer in the country, it's a reminder of the very real duality of welcoming, safe expanse and dangerous possibility.

"Growing up, the landscape meant different things to me," Hall says.

"Being terrorized as a queer kid in a redneck town, I sought refuge in the open spaces. But I also knew that at any moment, a gang of thugs could appear. For me, even the most beautiful countryside was both a magical and menacing place. As I matured, the trees and fields provided solace and trepidation — they codified what life ahead may hold. Would I fulfill the promises I made to my parents? How would I make my mark and take the reins and move forward in my life? In every vista, opposing forces are at play."
