

Stev'nn Hall

REVERENCE

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STEV'NN HALL, Of Reverence and Revelations

Even when first opening its doors as a museum in 1793, the Louvre allowed for 'copyists' - artists seeking to learn from masterworks by faithfully copying their composition. It even provided free easels so artists could comfortably execute their attempt at creating an accurate reproduction. The expectation - indeed one of the key basics of classical art training - was to inculcate young artists with previous ways of seeing and shaping art. Tradition was the rule - not novelty, not liberty. With Reverence, Hamilton-based mixed media artist Stev'nn Hall seems, at first glance, to be continuing this tradition with his reconstructed near-replicas of work by three 19th century artists: Frederic Church, Claude Monet and Henri Fantin-Latour. But, closely observed, there is more artifice - and art - in Hall's fantastical images which aim not for mindless recreation but something wholly new albeit fashioned, partly, from old cloth. Hall's work is intended to re-engage and revitalize the transformative power in art by way of releasing its artful potential. Unlike copyists of old, Hall uses these earlier artists as a means not to limit but rather liberate our way of viewing landscape art.

Consider the tools Hall is working with. Church, Monet and Fantin-Latour were each artistic marvels during an age when the marvellous was still allowed to reign - when wonder combined with the emotional ecstasy of experience lead to a sublime appreciation of perception. Frederic Edwin Church - the great American landscape monumentalist - created large-scale works that were intended to evidence not just the topographical beauty he found in places still new and wondrous to many people (Niagara Falls, Yosemite, the Andes in South America) but, more expressively, the spirit of these transcendental scenes. The rolling thunder of Church's Niagara and the explosive allure of his Cotopaxi swept viewers up in sensation, in a feeling that these places were alive with potential. When his The Heart of the Andes - measuring 5' x 10' - was first exhibited in the mid-1800s, people paid a 25¢ admission to "experience" the work. Even Mark Twain found the painting overwhelming after witnessing its "enchanting" power. Claude Monet was also interested in transforming vision and used the surface appeal and murky abstraction of his many closely-observed scenes of water lilies to expand the appreciation of landscape art beyond banal representation. Forgoing contours and boundaries, Monet immediately plunges into the tangled weave and emotion of his watery worlds as he helped pioneer the 20th-century belief that vision is fundamentally subjective. And while Henri Fantin-Latour's many floral still lifes (he painted over 500 in his lifetime) might seem academically old-school, his carefully arranged assemblages are intended to serve as divining rods of perception. In their intimate, poetic grace, his flowers take on a sense of human frailty and coquettish charm. In their very stillness, they seem to expand and shift, bloom and weep before our eyes.

So what does Hall make of these masterworks? More than might be first observed. Hall has long been interested in the sublime power inherent in art and his earlier photo-based mixed media collages crackle with personal expressive energy. But for Reverence Hall is playing a tricky game intended to spark the viewer toward a new state of awareness. It's a cunning collection that uses deception to tease out personal truths. While many of the individual pieces appear to be fairly accurate representations of the original work, their distortions are telling. In many instances, Hall has personalized, indeed Canadianized, the images. In his ravishing An Evening By The Sea, Hall has subbed in the Saint Lawrence for wherever Church envisaged in the original. And Hall has added Albertan mountains to The Heart of the Andes while elsewhere including local Ontario spots - a tree from his backyard, a place that he knew in childhood - as a means of making the work more personally expressive. By artfully (and digitally) toying with mimicry, the images become a compelling puzzle for what is "real" in this false world. But that sleight of hand only adds to the haunting mystery evident in the work. Their full, illuminating, expressive value lies - as with the originals - in their sublime power to engage our emotions as much as our vision.

Consider Hall's Paradise Lost which echoes Monet's masterful scenes of water lilies. Realized at a large size (human scale), Hall's work is immersive and overpowering - it draws you into its kaleidoscope of surface details while pulling you down into its murky depths. When Monet painted his Nymphéas series late in life, he suffered from severe cataracts and was almost blind. For him, the water lilies were a last vestige of a life spent looking at and feeling the world around him. For Hall, still spry in his vision and artistry, he also uses the subject matter as a means of engaging the world on an emotional level. In revering and then recalibrating these masterful works, Hall is paying thoughtful (and artfully deceptive) homage to the old idea that landscape art can still provoke our senses and prompt us toward personal revelation.

Barry Dumka, 2019