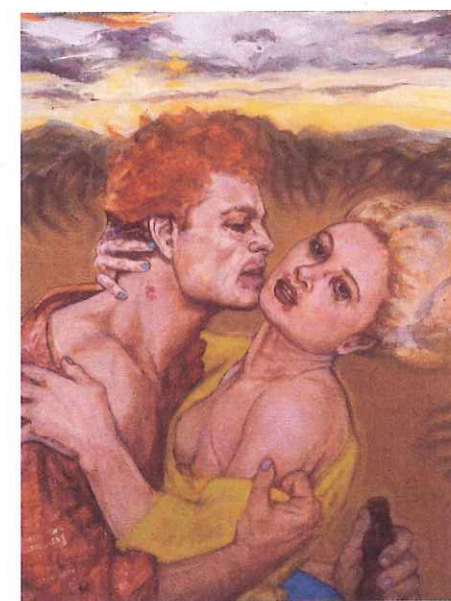


This series of essays on emerging Canadian artists is sponsored by THE FRASER ELLIOTT FOUNDATION in memory of BETTY ANN ELLIOTT

[Spotlight]



ABOVE: *The Bitter with the Sweet*
2000 Oil on canvas 22.8 x 30.5 cm
Photo Tim Wickens

OPPOSITE: *Phantom Love Projection*
1999 Oil on canvas 106 x 91 cm
Photo Tim Wickens

Canada is not kind to its sensualists. Especially its female ones.

Internationally acclaimed novelist Barbara Gowdy was still called a “bad girl” well into her career and long after the publication of her early, quirkily lewd stories. Pop singer Carole Pope fled to LA after years of being manhandled in the media for her overtly sexual material, while performance artist Shannon Bell endured her own media shitstorm for daring to offer seminars on the female orgasm. Our womenfolk are best advised to keep their desires hidden under thick, muffling Hudson’s Bay blankets.

If the mainstream media paid any attention to visual artists, what would it say about Eliza Griffiths, the Larry Clark of figurative painters? How would it process her openly, indeed brazenly sexual images of horny youth and gender-blending, topless tarts? Are we ready for her dream world full of sticky kisses, bruised makeup and cum-flecked back seats? Can the polite classes handle all her white-trash-in-heat glamour?

When the media wakes up (and it will), I suspect it’ll warm to Griffiths gingerly, perhaps with a simple opening question like, What’s a hot tamale like you doing living in a cold porridge town like Ottawa?

“Why Ottawa? I know, I know. It’s a like/hate relationship. I lived in Montreal for six years [where she earned a BFA from Concordia University in 1991], and came back to Ottawa to earn some money. I ended up accidentally staying for ten years. Ottawa allows me the space to work, plus it’s close to bigger places. I go and get my stimulation in bursts and then come back and gestate.”

The gestation clearly pays off. Griffiths’ latest body of work (shown in September 2001 at Toronto’s Katharine Mulherin Gallery, under the not-so-subtle title *Le Besoin*) solidifies her position as the pre-eminent painter of all things young and hormonal—the beautiful kids frolicking on Griffiths’ canvases practically give off pheromones. Underneath the rough-housing,

The Devil in Ms. Griffiths

Eliza Griffiths paints paintings that catch and keep moments of intense desire

by R. M. Vaughan

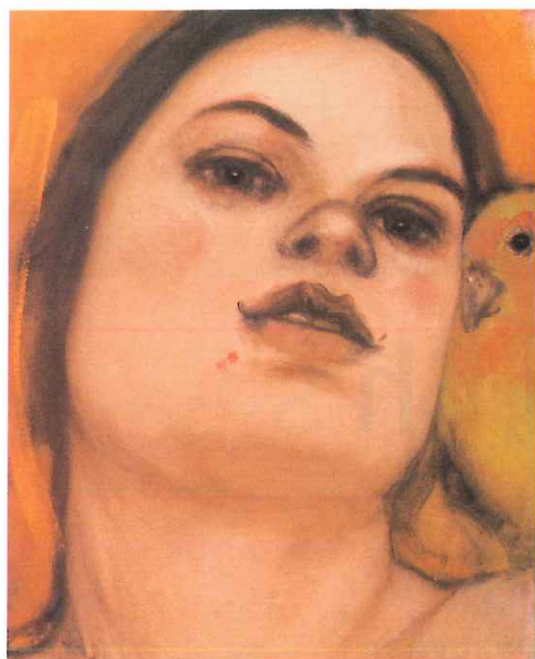
however, lurks a new, very painterly attention to the physicality of her paintings. Griffiths' mixture of soft focus and hard line, always a strong point in her works, is now becoming more than a mere signature look. Rather, this push-pull is becoming the architecture, the *plot*, if you will, of her painting's obvious psychological themes of control and vulnerability.

No doubt this is heady stuff for Griffiths' many fans, most of whom would rather discuss her babes than her brush work. Griffiths' startling talent as a painter, her complete control of both her chosen materials and the internal structure of her compositions, is too often looked at as something of a bonus prize. Because her subjects are so hot, it's easy to ignore how coolly and precisely Griffiths zeroes in on her models, how ultimately her paintings are about catching and keeping, not merely flaunting, moments of intense desire.

"Most people don't get beyond the subject matter, which is understandable, I suppose. It can be a little like a perceptual game—how to elicit responses from pigment on a surface. It's frustrating and intriguing to me that people can become so convinced and immersed by the illusion created by these dabs of paint that they don't actually examine the work as a *painting*."

Katharine Mulherin, Griffiths' Toronto dealer, realizes that sometimes her star's more painterly skills get overlooked, but hastens to add that she deals with "generally a very intelligent, informed clientele."

"Sometimes people do look at the work quickly, if they're uncomfortable with the images," Mulherin admits, "but Eliza's admirers tend to take their time with the paintings, fall into them."



"For me, a lot of Eliza's work is about a very thoughtful balance of inclusion and exclusion. She mixes extremely finished surfaces with very loose and informal moments—worked and reworked sections with areas where you can see the pencil marks. That play is very much in tune with the psychological aspects of the work, the quiet power struggles between the characters.

"If you look at her faces," Mulherin elaborates, "you see how she has painted and repainted to a point where her brush work is almost invisible. Eliza calls this 'auditioning' her faces. Some of them look and feel like Cover Girl makeup foundation, they're so smooth. The psychology of Eliza's work radiates from the beautiful faces."

Indeed, a closer look at the paintings reveals an almost fanatical attention to the gradation of skin tone, to all the smudges and streaks underneath even the healthiest glow. Griffiths' new paintings are also markedly softer than her previous works. Hair sits atop heads like glowing haloes, in diaphanous counterpoint to the finely etched faces it encircles. Clothing is rendered as a series of watery folds, more like damp seaweed than constructed garments. And her backgrounds, formerly detailed vistas packed with biographical, character-defining details, have dissolved into soupy visions of innocuous trees and empty, monochromatic fields—the kind you see before you in a dream.

Stick figures and sketches of unidentifiable animals linger far away from the main action, reinforcing the hallucinatory charms of the make-out close-ups. One wonders if Griffiths' glistening, imperfectly angelic kids might actually be angels, residents of a floating world. Or, at least, fallen angels.

"I needed to change, break my own rules," Griffiths confirms, "and I have a desire to reveal my processes a little, let the paint speak. Previously, I had a furtive painter's attitude—I defended my choices as I might try to defend falling in love with someone bad, the 'I can't help it' defence. Now I'm a born-again painter, discovering the riches of the medium with no holds barred."

Griffiths does not work from live models, preferring her imagination, photographs and book covers as sources, while sometimes inserting herself as protagonist in her mini-romances. She describes her working process simply as "very exploratory."

"My main interest has always been in painting internally generated faces, characters, or figures, as distinct from portraiture. The only thing I predetermine about my figures is their gender. Then I go about constructing a 'person' to hold court in the painting, by allowing the layered painting process to build the image. It's very Dr. Frankenstein."

Because of her training, and, one suspects, in part because she lives in the PC capital of the world, Griffiths sees herself as part of a feminist tradition. The boys in her work, she points out, are just as cute as the girls and just as lovingly painted—a viewer would be hard pressed to choose a winner in the gaze=power sweepstakes.

But anything to do with sex and gender is inherently a hall of mirrors. What, or who, is being eroticized here? Is Griffiths subverting, reinforcing, or merely playing with established



ABOVE: *Need for Concern*
2001 Oil on canvas 50.8 x 60.9 cm
Photo David Barbour

OPPOSITE: *Birdy* 2001
Oil on canvas 20.3 x 27.9 cm
Photo David Barbour

codes of boy-girl sexuality? Above all, who are these paintings for?

"The work is for me, and then for you, the viewer [who the characters are noticing and, in a strange way, demanding respect from]. The erotic gaze is my own. I have always been interested in sexuality, and when I am painting the characters I pivot back and forth between inhabiting them, male and female—and desiring them, debating with them, activating them. I don't presume a male or female, gay or straight viewer, but all of the above at once. My gaze is an attempt to destabilize a passive viewing experience."

Understandably, Griffiths gets tired of the incessant pawing of her pretties by undersexed arts journalists, so I back off and ask a more mundane question, something about future projects and current obsessions.

"A series of large romance-novel-cover paintings. Three depict ecstatic religious sex, three are hard fight scenes. I'm doing research on the functions of the brain, such as hormones, behavioural disorders, mania, etc., and on sex, sexuality, like always, and on human adaptation. I'm exploring subtle communications, such as the *idea* of a fight, the way an all-girl soccer match works. Power and the admission of vulnerability."

The girl can't help it. Lucky us. ■