

SHELLEY ADLER'S EMPATHETIC PORTRAITS IN PAINT

by GILLIAN MACKAY

Character Study



Shelley Adler in her studio, 2007
PHOTO GIOINNE MACAFFEE

Untitled (blue woman) 2007
Oil on canvas 2.13 x 1.82 m
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY NICHOLAS METIVIER
GALLERY PHOTOS MICHAEL CULLEN

FOR SOME TIME NOW, the art world has been enthralled by Cinderella stories about hot young artists who win the Turner Prize, sell their entire grad shows to the Guggenheim, wind up on the cover of *Artforum*, that sort of thing. By comparison, traditional scenarios about perfecting one's craft or finding one's vision over time seem as outdated as plotlines in a 900-page Russian novel.

For the Toronto artist Shelley Adler, the slow track is what it's all about. At 46, she has been painting seriously all her adult life, and has only just begun to hit her stride. "I feel as if I have had a 20-year apprenticeship," she says. "I mean that. I'm just at the beginning." And to judge from the recent canvases on the walls of her light-filled west-end studio, she is on a roll.

The psychologically charged self-portrait *Turning Away* is arguably her most important work yet. The pain, tension and vulnerability inherent in the unnatural twist of the figure's neck give rise to a host of questions: is she turning away to avoid a blow? Recalling wounds of the past? Offering her cheek in forgiveness? The drama is embodied in the paint itself, in the boldness of iridescent black on jade green, in the way a whispery lock of hair falls over thick, creamy volumes of flesh and bone, or the grounding curve of the black T-shirt echoes the sudden whoosh of dark hair above the nape.

To chart Adler's progress, one need only compare the revised version of *Untitled (boy looking down)* (2007), a painting of her son Ruben, with an earlier version from 2006. In January, Adler asked for the painting back from her dealer, Nicholas Metivier. A number of things bothered her: the background was lackluster, certain defining marks were mechanical rather than felt, the torso lacked volume. "She is never really satisfied," says Metivier. "She is always pushing and challenging herself."

After five months of on-and-off reworking, Adler produced a painting that is light-years beyond its pallid predecessor in confidence and expression. Comparing the two, it is as if a ghost has come to life. "Finding an image slowly allows the paint to speak,"



Untitled (boy looking down)
2007 Oil on canvas
96.5 x 96.5 cm

she says. "The time it takes to make a painting is revealed in the work. It slows time down, and in a fast world, that's good."

Painting the human face has been Adler's obsession for as long as she can remember. The quality of that obsession can be summed up in a quotation from the novel *Gilead* that her husband, Paul Cohen, recently pointed out to her: "...I realize there is nothing more astonishing than a human face...Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it. But this is truest of the face of an infant. I consider that to be one kind of vision, as mystical as any."

What Adler brings to portraiture—a genre that has suffered a crisis of purpose since the invention of the photograph—is a rare combination of skilled draftsmanship, painterly intelligence and empathy. Her portraits are not about the dead hand of art history, the tyranny of the media, identity formation, social injustice, racial politics or queer theory. They are not about anything other than people and paint.

Radically, in an age of no consensus about what it means to be human, she is concerned with just that: being human. "Alex Katz says he finds the humanist tradition so repugnant and cloying he has to take a shower after he looks at a Rembrandt portrait," she remarks. "I'm not sure I believe him. When you look at his portraits of his wife, Ada, she is really there. When I am working on a face, even an imaginary one, I have to believe that there is someone there."

Adler's own appreciation of art is generous and eclectic. On a

recent trip to New York City, she took in exhibitions of portraits by Francesco Clemente at Mary Boone Gallery, sculptures by Tim Hawkinson at PaceWildenstein and photographs by Jeff Wall at the Museum of Modern Art. Still, the experience that resonates most deeply is the half-hour she spent in front of a favourite Vermeer, *A Maid Asleep*, at the Metropolitan. For her own pleasure, she is currently at work on a copy of a small pre-Renaissance Madonna and Child that is part of the Frick Collection.

It is not surprising that Adler has long considered herself out of the mainstream. As a fine-art student at York University, she was frustrated by the lack of support there for figurative painting, a situation common in North American art schools at the time. In search of rigorous formal training, she spent a year at the Edinburgh College of Art. "If I had known how hard it was going to be, I probably would not have done it," she recalls. "We would spend two weeks on a single drawing."

After graduating from York in 1983, Adler worked as an assistant to the gallerist Olga Korper before entering the two-year master's program at Boston University in 1985. "One of the reasons I went to Boston was that Philip Guston had taught there for many years. Even though he died in 1980, I figured that his spirit would still be around, and it was. Everyone was still talking about him."

At Boston University, there was a non-judgmental embrace of representational art, historical and contemporary. Whatever a student's bent—from the *plein-air* style of Fairfield Porter to the edgy urbanity of Philip Guston—the school supported it.

AN ARTIST IN LOVE WITH HER MEDIUM, ADLER HANDLES PAINT LIKE A LIVING FORCE

"My eyes were opened. I saw that there were many avenues for being a contemporary artist."

The contrast with Toronto, where the tiny, progressive art community has never been particularly hospitable to figuration, was instructive. Somewhat reluctantly, she returned to the city in 1988. "Putting your life together as an artist after you finish school is really hard," she recalls. "I slept on my brother's couch for six months. I never stopped working, but I didn't know how to deal with the gallery world. I didn't know where I was going."

Adler married Paul Cohen in 1990 and worked as a courtroom illustrator for Global TV until the birth of their daughter, Zoe, in 1991. "From everything I read and heard it was clear that art and kids were not meant to go together," she recalls wryly. A close family member suggested she "hang up her brushes," but she continued to paint whenever she could, first in the basement of the house, and then, after the birth of her son Ezra in 1993, in a low-rent studio shared with two other women. (Her second son, Ruben, was born in 1996.)

Female artists of Adler's generation, unless their project was overtly feminist, often shunned the domestic for fear of not being taken seriously. With no reputation to protect, Adler made still-life paintings of the mess on her kitchen table. A related series featured a female figure doing chores such as loading a dishwasher or picking up a laundry hamper. "There was a period when it seemed as if I was always bending over," she says. "I felt like a slave, angry and resentful."

Throughout this period, she also found ways to exhibit, first in humble venues such as the local library, later, alongside friends from York University, in ambitious warehouse productions such as "circa 1997" and finally, through 2005, in the Queen Street collective Loop. Energetic and collegial, she was a moving force in the alternative art community for more than a decade. Her first solo show in a private commercial gallery in Toronto was with Nicholas Metivier in 2006.

The acquisition of her own studio in 2002 and the growing independence of her children have allowed Adler to paint more regularly and in a more focused manner. An ongoing project has been a series of fictional women with gigantic faces painted like close-ups of film stars; a newer body of work originated in casual snapshots of her children and herself around the house.

The imaginary women are derived from Adler's image bank of faces from the 1960s, ranging from that of her mother to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Riffing off the French Pop artist Martial Raysse's 1963 painting of a dark-haired beauty with heavily made-up eyes, Adler invented her own characters in works such as *High Tension Magenta* (2006) and *Untitled (blue woman)* (2007). "It should not have the look of a commissioned portrait," she says of the latter. "You are never going to know who she is. The question is, can she tell a story that is interesting to you, and highlights your story?"

More personal, and risky for the artist, are the paintings based on her family. For years, she shied away from painting her young chil-

dren, unwilling to air her ambivalence about motherhood. Now that they are older, she is more willing to investigate that complexity; she is also fascinated by the changes she sees at close range: the maturing of boys into men, of girls into women and women into middle age.

The process has caused her to question herself on a number of fronts: is she exploiting her children? Might she sink into clichéd sentimentality, like a latter-day Mary Cassatt? How can images pertinent to her own life resonate with a wider audience?

Painting from personal experience was, of course, never a problem for the Old Masters, and it is essential to the practice of the greatest living portraitist, Lucian Freud. Although Freud, too, began by painting imaginary faces, he has long preferred to paint people he cares about, family members in particular. "If you don't know them," he once remarked, "it can only be like a travel book."

In this vein, Adler's intimacy with her subjects illuminates her portraiture in a profound yet subtle way. She uses a number of distancing devices to mitigate the presence of sentimentality and to refute any suggestion (for some reason abhorrent to her) that her goal is to achieve a realistic likeness. One such device has been to paint from Polaroids; the harsh lighting undermines the illusion of naturalism, and the blurred contours eliminate an unwanted surfeit of information.

An artist in love with her medium, Adler handles paint like a living force. In her works, marks, shapes and passages have an abstract expressive power that is independent of their representational function. For example, the quirky, red-ringed teardrop shape that describes a portion of the figure's neck in *Turning Away* is also a kind of free radical. It adds a touch of malignancy to the painting's drama and energizes the passage of the viewer's eye across the canvas. "Ultimately, that's what painting is," she says, "a network of relationships."

Another strategy has been to engage in an ongoing private dialogue with art. Her 2006 painting of her son, *Ezra Sleeping*, is loosely based on *Dead (Tote)*, a 1988 painting by Gerhard Richter of the German terrorist Ulrike Meinhof lying dead in a prison cell with her head thrust back. At the Richter retrospective at the MOMA in 2002, Adler was riveted by the grim, blurry black-and-white painting, which was based on forensic photographs. Later, in London, England, she encountered a version of Richter's painting by another of her heroes, the Amsterdam-based South African artist Marlene Dumas.

Adler's purpose was not to deconstruct or appropriate Richter or Dumas. *Ezra Sleeping* does convey a sense of the child's mortality, yet the dominant theme is that of love. "I wanted to get at that thing that happens when you look at a child asleep," she says. "The lightness of it. Love restored after the battles of the day. That fine looking at your children, the space between a mother and child."

What the experience brought home to Adler was that her own path as a painter could only be one of affirmation. "I can't come from the direction of death," she says. "I'm coming from life." ■