

Gary Michael Dault, September 2006



High Tension Magenta

By Shelley Adler

To Sept. 30, at Nicholas Metivier Gallery, 451 King St. W., 416-205-9000.

She's a big girl. Or, more accurately, she's a big face. Toronto painter Shelley Adler has titled the painting -- with a nice feeling for the theatricality of colour -- *High Tension Magenta*, and her high-tension magenta woman is 2.4 metres high and 1.8 metres wide. She's vast -- like a billboard or an image on a movie screen.

But there's nothing mechanical about her. She's a real painting. Adler carefully points out that *High Tension Magenta* did not begin, for example, as a slide projected onto the canvas and copied there in oils, nor was the image grided and then laboriously transferred to the canvas surface square by square.

So how did she get painted? "I just go at it," Adler tells me on the phone from her home. "You leapt right into the painting?" I ask her. "Don't you draw the image first?" "Oh sure, I draw first," Adler assures me, "but with the brush." So, in fact, it's all painting.

"But the painting -- like all my paintings -- did have a source," she adds. "I found her in a newspaper six or seven years ago, and cut her out. She's been in my sketchbook for ages. As a matter of fact, Adler reminds me, this particular magenta face began its life as one of 52 small face paintings she showed in 2000 at the Blackwood Gallery at the University of Toronto in Mississauga. I remember her.

Now, in her first exhibition at the Nicholas Metivier Gallery, she has billowed out into her present lush gigantism.

Why faces? And why, more particularly, fully frontal, confrontational faces? First of all, the frontal face, bereft of any socializing or acculturating context, as Adler's almost always are, read more like maps than stories. What Adler is after, she says, is pure painting and, as she puts it, "a face is an excuse to make a painting. The paint tells one half of the story. The face tells the other half."

There are other canvases in Adler's Metivier exhibition that are not full-frontal faces. There are paintings such as *Boy Sleeping* (based on a photo of her son) and *Untitled (Girl in a Towel)*, which is based on a photo of her 15-year-old daughter.

Here, too, the figures are painted against neutral, more or less undifferentiated grounds. But the subjects, if not realistic in the strictest sense, are at least anecdotal. Their skin tones are flesh tones (not the irrational purple or the searing Naples yellow her big faces are apt to support), and they are clearly engaged in doing something (sleeping, walking from here to there). They are, in other words, in the world, and are inevitably the locus of narrative.

There are also some skillfully rendered paintings here of long dining-room tables punctuated with silverware and crystal and bowls of flowers, usually with only a suggestion of attendant chairs -- but with no people gathered around. Family gatherings without the gathered family. Adler admits to being, from way back, a fervent student of still-life painting, and admits that she "enjoys reproducing effects" and "getting them right."

And why not? And yet these more socialized paintings simply take

their place in a long tradition that stretches from the Renaissance to modernist painters such as Alex Katz, Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans -- and Adler's contribution to that tradition is, so far, respectable but not stellar.

It's big faces like that of *High Tension Magenta* where Adler comes into her own. Yes, her colour is distantly Warholian, but her intentions are very different. "I loved makeup when I was a girl," Adler tells me. "Makeup offers your face as a surface, as a pure place of painting." (The *High Tension Magenta* woman's face has deep violet eye makeup.)

Shakespeare's Hamlet harshly reminds poor Ophelia that God gives women one face and they make themselves another. If Shelley Adler had been there, she would have asked Hamlet what his point was.