

# NICHOLAS METIVIER GALLERY

**Joanne Tod**

*Once Removed*

By Catherine Osborne

When looking at paintings by Joanne Tod in the context of an exhibition, I'm inclined to search for the connecting dots that will give the grouping a cohesive meaning. Each painting stands on its own, but when they are hung as an exhibition, there's an urge to figure out an underpinning theme or find the story. It's never that logical, though, and never so easy. Tod is a master of realism. Her paintings are as clear as photographs, yet they are also full of enigmas. The objects, places and people they depict are familiar, but how they relate to one another is oftentimes just beyond reach.

Her latest exhibition involves a lot of shimmering metallic surfaces. There are close-ups of pressed tin—the kind used on ceilings in the Victorian era—as well as smaller paintings that depict, variously, a disco ball, a pair of copper fermenting tanks used in micro-breweries, and a burnished vessel of unknown lineage. Reflective surfaces have been a constant in Tod's work for decades, and the effect never fails to draw the eye, which oscillates between taking in the overall image and studying the artist's energetic brushstrokes up close.

But what do these paintings have to do with a kaleidoscopic mosaic of Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady*, or the series of portraits of the current Toronto Raptors, arranged in order of the players' height? The title of the exhibition, *Once Removed*, is a hint. It's a term used in genealogy, but it also means one step away from the original. It suggests, too, the idea that once something's been removed, it can never be replaced.

Tod has said the idea for the exhibition began with the experience of looking into her own ancestral history and discovering that her family roots are Eastern European. One painting, a self-portrait titled *47% Europe East, 24% Great Britain, 19% Ireland/Scotland/Wales*, reveals the artist reflected in the polished surface of a Russian samovar vessel that fills the centre of the canvas. The work also reveals her preference to paint from a secondary source, working from digital images rather than real life. From there, however, thematic connections between one painting and the next start to loosen into something more tangential, almost random.

One afternoon last winter, Tod invited me to her studio to see where she was at with her work. Three of the pressed-tin paintings were half finished, and already they looked magnificent. We spent the afternoon talking about them along with current affairs and life in general. We discussed the history of tin ceilings and how such a flimsy material—a cheap stand-in for the exquisitely handcrafted plaster that inspired them—had become widespread across North America in the early 20th century. Their

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deceptiveness reminded us both of Trump, which led to us other analogies to our current times, especially how real and fake have become so interchangeable they're barely distinguishable.

That's my reading of the paintings, as metaphors for our attraction to shiny objects and our often crippling inability to see past them. Tod isn't opposed to letting the meaning in her work slip and slide. In fact, she tends to resist logic by adding riddle-like titles that both reveal and obscure. Colour palettes and Shakespeare are referenced, somewhat obliquely, in the titles of the pressed-tin paintings. One is titled *Malcolm Gladwell*, a nod to the author's dual identities as a Canadian living in the States and as someone with a Jamaican mother and a British father. Tod worked on the painting while listening to Gladwell's Revisionist History podcast and found herself making connections between the architectural relic she was rendering and each podcast episode, in which an event or person from the past is explored to see if history got it right the first time.

Of the title of the Audrey Hepburn painting, Tod wrote in an email: "I called it *Moules en Rotation*, as a nod to Marcel Broodthaers, who used mussel shells a lot in his work, which had absurdist titles. This painting, with the repeating motif of the hat, always reminded me of mussel shells!" These exquisite bits of rhythmic wordplay—works of art in their own right—are the least structured aspect of Tod's creative thinking, and they offer an intriguing counterpoint to the masterful discipline and precision she has as a painter.

Still, what about those Raptors portraits? Presented as an adjunct exhibit, the series could be interpreted as another form of repartee: the sports celebrities who are "once removed" from the rest of us by their fame and fortune. But Tod has always been interested in portraiture as a way to capture moments that define our collective consciousness. In the past she has painted such icons as Martha Stewart in 2004, the year the domestic diva went to jail, and Guy Paul Morin, following his release from prison after DNA proved his innocence (1995). Here, each NBA all-star is rendered from the neck up on a white background, then grouped on the wall to represent the entire team for the 2018–19 season. The format unites the 15 players, who in the real world are traded so quickly that two had already become free agents before Tod could finish the work. This group, frozen in time, is like a time stamp for the exhibition itself, which ultimately has its own lifespan before it is dispersed.

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