

LEESA STREIFLER: In Relation

April 18 - May 12, 2012



Art Gallery of Regina

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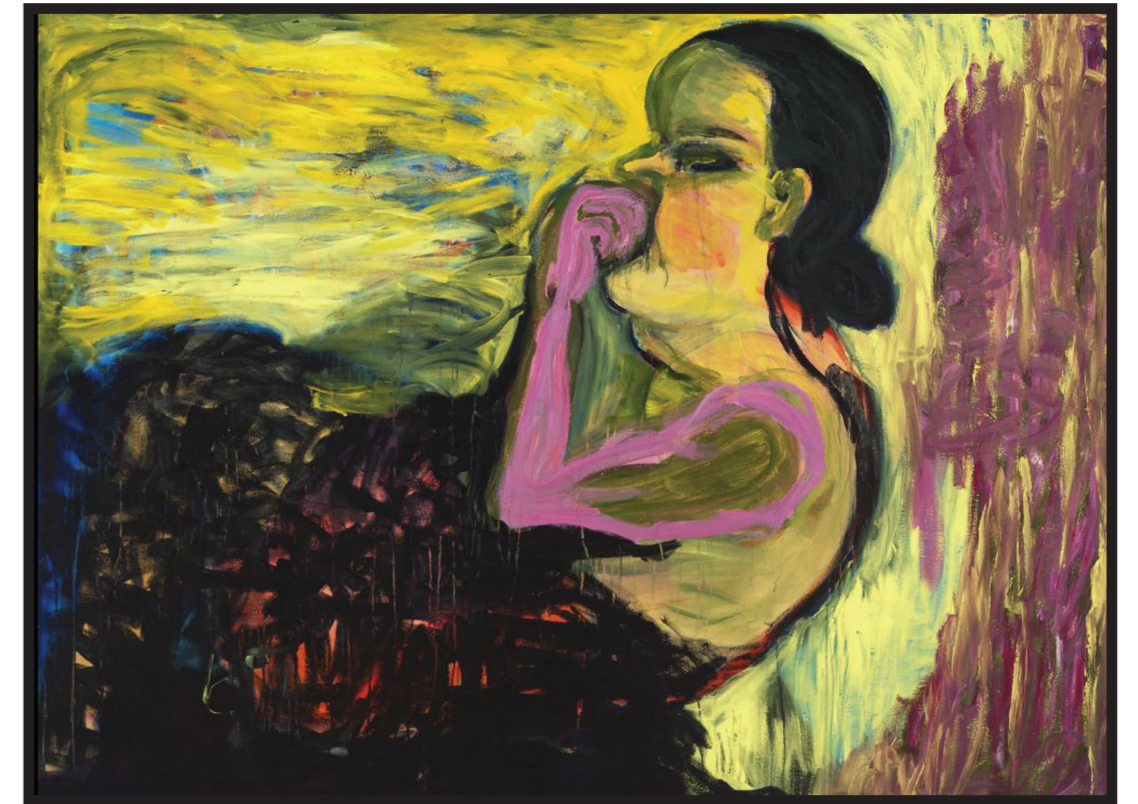
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"Primal", 2011, acrylic on canvas, 54 x 72"; 137.16 x 182.88 cm



"Ingrained", 2011, acrylic on canvas, 54 x 72"; 137.16 x 182.88 cm

Cover: "Her House", 2010, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 42"; 152.4 x 106.68 cm

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There is a rawness and sincerity about Leesa Streifler's figurative paintings in the exhibition **In Relation**. Within this new series, Streifler offers viewers an honest, intuitive approach towards subjects that are autobiographical in nature, unabashedly depicting the female body to address issues or thoughts on aging, depression, illness, sexuality, motherhood, familial relationships and childhood memories. Bold, compelling images hover on or dissolve into vast coloured grounds, gestural forms and lines combine with an unadulterated use of colour, all contributing to sincere expressions of emotion and life experience. Contrasting thin and thick layers of paint build up the surfaces of these paintings, where washes run and drip and impasto brushstrokes are overlaid, offering us insights into her creative process. There is a play between figure and ground in each work where images overlap and fragment, seemingly disappearing into or emerging out of the painted surfaces. Some figures are reduced to a series of lines, drawings in paint, while others are cropped or abstracted, existing as heads without bodies, bodies without limbs. The melting figures of Francis Bacon, the markmaking and abstraction of Willem de Kooning's women and the simplified, exposed and isolated bodies of Marlene Dumas all came to mind in viewing these paintings. While recognizing her painting lineage, Streifler employs strategies that place her works within the concerns of contemporary painting, constantly negotiating between engaging with her medium and the everyday world around her.

Painting as a practice is not what Leesa Streifler is known for. Although Streifler has worked with the medium throughout her artistic practice, she has rarely exhibited paintings. Her best known works are photo-based images that incorporate and are transformed by drawing, such as in the *Normal* series exhibited at the Dunlop Art Gallery in 1998. This strategy of modifying images through drawing interventions reappears in this new series of paintings. While each figure is outlined, as a means of emphasizing while flattening the figure, drawing is then reapplied on top of the painted forms, introducing expressive lines and gestures, further altering, distorting and abstracting the figures.

Feminist theory has informed Streifler's work throughout her artistic practice. Using the female body as an index or reference point, she has investigated socially constructed notions of the feminine and challenged traditional gender roles. These investigations in previous series led her to explore theories on the carnivalesque and grotesque body, bodies which are performative and defy social conventions. Using her body as subject and employing costumes and theatrics to play out stereotypical roles or concepts of femininity, as well as incorporating interventional drawing and text to transform photographic images, Streifler's female figures were depicted as angry, aggressive, confrontational, non-conforming, mocking, anxiety-driven and defiant. These figures challenge viewers in their poses, outward stares and cutting statements.

The figures presented to us here reflect a distinct difference, offering new narratives. Although these figures remain strong and somewhat defiant, they do not possess the same aggression as seen in previous series. Streifler's painting approach in itself may be aggressive and confident, but the resulting images are quieter in nature. Rarely looking out at the viewer, these female figures are captured in moments in time, either caught in private, solitary acts like reading or eating, or engaged in intimate interactions with others – a child, a lover, a family pet. These are narratives that we are witness to. Like Streifler's previous figures, these women struggle with depression, anxiety, the roles that they play in their everyday lives, and body image, coming to terms with their aging bodies, their mortality and the impact of health issues. These images, though, also offer a sense of reflexivity, introspection, hopeful romanticism and tenderness.

Works, such as *Mother* and *Attached* are representations of motherhood, exploring the bond between mother and child. Psychoanalytic theory on motherhood has posited the mother, being the primary nurturer, as the child's most important 'object', especially early in a child's development¹. In her own maternal role, Streifler acknowledges that her body is made available to her son, becoming an object of comfort and nurturance. The large image of the mother figure in *Mother* overwhelms the picture plane, signifying her as her child's protector.

An exploration of the relationship between humans and animals is introduced in works, such as *Bond* and *With Her*. *Bond* offers a tender exchange between the artist and her standard poodle, Daisy, while *With Her*, with its x-ray-like imagery, seems to suggest that beneath the skin, we share more in common with animals than we may realize. Having engaged in research on animal/human communications, Streifler believes that animals possess an innate knowledge of the world around them and natural states of being or traits that humans can learn from.

Reflections on childhood memories are also introduced into this series of paintings, offering symbolic depictions of people and experiences that have impacted the artist's sense of self. *Her House* represents memories of her grandmother, someone whom she felt deeply connected to. Associative images connected to her grandmother float within the picture plane – snapdragons, a bird, the floor plan of her house and the numbers of her address. Could the depiction of her grandmother, a body without a head, refer to the losses of memory we all experience when trying to recall details of a lost loved one? Details of a face and the sound of a voice may be lost to memory but the impression that person has made and the emotion of that association is what stays with us. *Ingrained* references a negative memory from her childhood of being chastised for her appearance, an experience she internalized. A ghostly image of a child's head hovers on top of an adult body, solemnly looking out at the viewer, while a woman's face floats in space, separate from the body, turning to defiantly face the antagonist.

Primal is an arresting image of a woman eating in solitude on a couch, addressing issues of body image, depression and anxiety. This act of comforting herself through satiating her desire to eat is emphasized through incorporating drawing into the painting, accentuating her hand at her mouth. The intensity of the image is heightened through colour and the handling of figure/ground; the figure projects a sense of catharsis or resignation, while the background is activated with aggressive brushstrokes, seemingly swirling around her.

References to theories of the abject and grotesque carry over into this series, as reflected in the presentation of truncated or fragmented figures. Within this fragmentation, the torso or core of the body is usually favoured, thereby emphasizing the organs, such as the heart, liver and stomach, organs that represent or exhibit the repercussions of emotion physically felt in the body. Images that address illness, pain and aging, with curving spines, stretch marks, age spots, and figures that show the impact of life experience, are also depictions of bodies that defy social convention.

Streifler's approach towards the canvas is aggressive, confident, uninhibited and intuitive, translating into paintings that possess a sincere honesty. Here the personal is political. It takes bravery to face one's past and present as realized through a creative process and to openly share one's inner thoughts and struggles for critical engagement. Streifler admits that she has a driving need to depict her experience; seeing it realized in paint in a tangible form somehow completes the experience for her². An article on de Kooning's work recently discussed "how much painting is a physical thing"; how it's one of the few media that illustrates so succinctly how "the brain is a part of the body" and consequently how "the body is intelligent". In painting, you need them both³. The visceral quality and sensuous immediacy of Streifler's imagery, combined with her theoretical and experiential inquiries, makes this statement ring true.

Jennifer McRorie

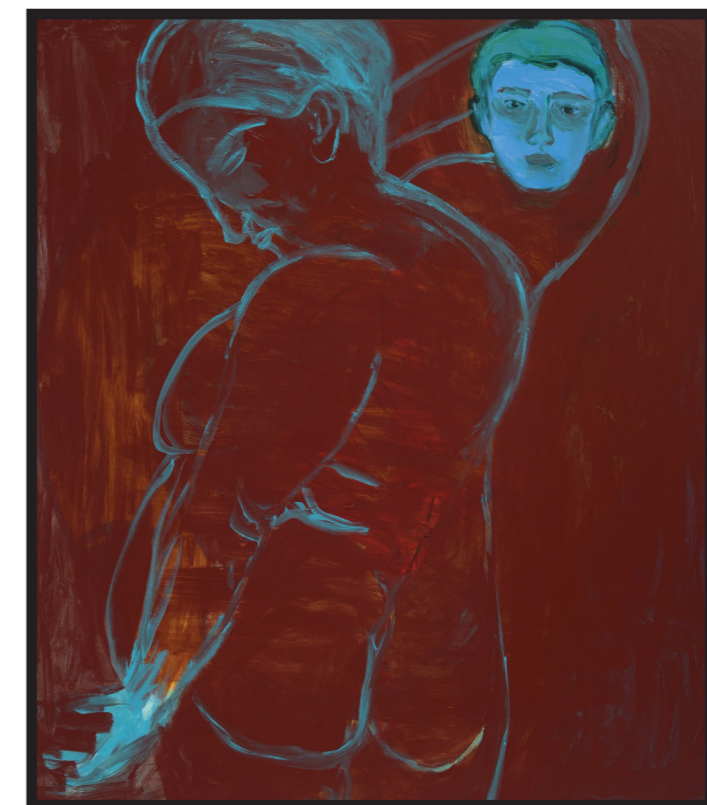
¹ Janice Doane & Devon Hodges, *From Klein to Kristeva: Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the 'Good Enough' Mother*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1992, p. 8.

² From an interview with the artist on February 3, 2012.

³ Robert Enright, *Willem de Kooning: Women on the Themes of the Paintings*, Border Crossings, Issue No. 121, p. 36.



"Bond", 2011, acrylic on canvas, 54 x 72"; 137.16 x 182.88 cm



"Attached", 2010, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 42"; 137.16 x 106.68 cm