

## Review: Doug Robinson depicts the everyday in an odd light

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WONDERLAND: PAINTINGS BY DOUG ROBINSON  
Elliott Louis Gallery  
To Nov. 8

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Meticulously constructed, a few of them life-size, they depict the everyday, but in an odd light. There is a subtext going on beneath the surface of these scenes of carnival activity, soccer players, art gallery goers and other things. They invite you to create your own narrative.

Curator Lynn Ruscheinsky has chosen a dozen pieces by Robinson for this first exhibition in six years. He's 62 and has made his money in construction but he's a serious painter, and a witty one.

Other works, not included in the show because they didn't fit its theme, merit attention too. Google Doug Robinson and see his *Titian Formula*, for example, of two women, one of them looking into a mirror.

The strangeness, the hieratic arrangement of the mirror holder and the woman who looks into it, suggest the intensity of a pre-Raphaelite painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti or Burne-Jones. What does the woman looking at herself see that makes her react so fixedly? The vanitas of the past might not be so different from the concerns of today. What does Madonna see when she looks in the mirror, for example?

For Ruscheinsky, the pieces on display have a theme of gender and class. But the themes are undercut sometimes by light-heartedness, sometimes by the sinister, or both. A crucial element is a built-in instability. That ferris wheel in one of the paintings is loaded with it. Structurally that wheel couldn't exist. One of the two women in front of it is grimacing, the other laughing. Is the grimace a reference to the obese man in the background who dourly observes them from a distance, or is she just looking into the sun?

Instability is also inherent in *Pork and Rabbit*: a sideshow at the PNE. A girl and a man lean across a booth, the girl standing precariously on a paint can, which contains the phrase "Alterior Paint." (The carnival barker, incidentally, is a portrait of gallery owner Ted Lederer.)

This work belongs to the Alex Colville school because Colville builds his own cryptic agenda into work that might only appear to be photographic.

A breath-taker is *Millie at English Bay*. A young nude woman reclines in a wicker chair on her deck, hidden from view as she regards a strolling couple on the seawall. The background highrises are beautifully rendered, as is the water, and the drift of clouds is almost surreal. But what may hold your attention is the unlit lightbulb directly over her.

Nobody is looking at the two women who stroll leisurely through the Vancouver Art Gallery, looking at paintings that reflect their own state, which is naked. These should be funny but strangely aren't. They'd be nothing more than a cartoon if they were.

Maybe they're not because you're aware, even subliminally, of other things as you're looking at them: the golden rectangles and spirals of classical composition, the painted-in multiple shadows of the paintings on the wall that pun on the conditions of the actual installation at the Elliott Louis. You are in that painting and you're looking at painting's DNA.

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