

Portraits Beyond Social Media

by Agnieszka Matejko
November 7, 2017 11:45 AM

RSS PRINT



Campbell Wallace, "The Ambassadors," 2015-2017, acrylic and oil on canvas, 54" x 36"

A carefully constructed and flattering self-image is hardly the invention of Facebook – portraits of showing the subject's status and success are seen throughout art history. Wealthy Egyptians immortalized themselves in tombs dating back to 1400 BC. In medieval times, donors were painted next to Christ, sometimes at a similar scale. Perhaps the main innovation of social media is the impression that everyone is always having fun, not to mention the ability to instantly gauge status based on the number of clicks.

Campbell Wallace's exhibition, *The Third Face*, at the Scott Gallery in Edmonton until Nov. 10, demonstrates a quintessential anti-social media aesthetic. His paintings are like peepholes into people's private life, depicting them not as they wish to be seen, but as they actually are. Wallace's unusual way of finding his subjects helps explain the stark impartiality of his gaze. A defining moment came when he discovered a stash of photographs hidden in a dresser he'd bought in a thrift store. This collection became immortalized in his meticulous oil paintings. Armed with a detachment and objectivity he had never thought possible, he began to search for more snapshots in trash bins, second-hand stores and, more recently, on the Internet.

Triviality, humour, despair and resilience shine from these paintings with radical honesty. Prosaic details of modern life become monumentalized; barely perceptible references to great masterpieces accentuate this effect. For instance, *The Wrestler* depicts a young woman stretched out on a cheap bed, her muscular legs thrust toward the viewer. At the centre of the painting, her short skirt reveals a provocative sliver of her underwear. It would be easy to dismiss this work as another example of the male gaze but for the references to Manet's *Olympia*. There are obvious clues: both women lie on a scarf or shawl with a cat at their feet, both are outlined in black, bringing a three-dimensional hand into focus.



Campbell Wallace, "The Wrestler," 2016-2017, acrylic and oil on canvas, 36" x 48"

But it's the expressive content of the paintings that offers the most striking parallels. When first exhibited, *Olympia* was so scandalous special security was needed. The problem was not the clear reference to prostitution: it was Olympia's direct, confrontational gaze, her hand covering her pubic hair, not coyly, but confidently. Manet had dared to depict a real woman instead of an idealized plaything. Wallace's subject also gazes directly at the viewer, her hand at her belly, crotch exposed. She is at ease and fully in control.

Such references to historical art are not incidental – Wallace alters the original images to include them. Some of his paintings even bear the same title as the masterpiece. The viewer is left to search for clues, as in a detective novel. Some are so subtle it's hard to control a squeal of delight when spotted. At close inspection, both Hans Holbein's and Wallace's *The Ambassadors* reveal a tiny, finely painted crucifix in the upper left hand corner. And Holbein's famous distorted skull is replicated on the shorts of one of the young men.



Campbell Wallace, "Trappings," 2014-2015, acrylic and oil on canvas, 29" x 36"

It's easy to get lost in this show's rich details: every cell phone, water bottle and piece of clothing is painted with precision. These snapshots of contemporary life, populated by nameless, ordinary people, leave a strong impression. Wallace's traditional medium belies his radical refocus on what it means to be young today. The posed, constructed and perennially smiling social media persona is replaced by real people – the ones we pass every day on the street but rarely truly see.

Since you're here...

...we're asking readers like you to support quality writing about Western Canada's art and artists during these uncertain times. Galleries West tells timely stories with accessible yet informed writing by arts journalists and other arts professionals. Our magazine is open to all, regardless of what they can afford to pay. Every reader contribution, however big or small, is valuable.

Support Galleries West. It only takes a minute. Thank you.

Support Galleries West, Donate Now

Scott Gallery

10411 124 St, Edmonton, Alberta T5N 3Z5

PHONE 780-488-3619

EMAIL info@scottgallery.com

WEBSITE [Visit Website](#)

HOURS Open Tues to Sat 10 am - 5 pm.

scottgallery

Campbell Wallace Scott Gallery 7 November 2017



Agnieszka Matejko

Agnieszka Matejko is an Edmonton community-based artist whose practice focuses on youth and children as well as engaging non-arts groups in public art projects. She has taught at MacEwan University and the University of Alberta.

November 7, 2017 11:45 AM

LATEST STORIES

Visceral Moments

BY KATHERINE YLITALO

[TrépanierBaer](#)

Jeff Wall

BY ANDREA VALENTINE-LEWIS

[Canton-sardine](#)

Margaux Williamson

BY LISSA ROBINSON

[Esker Foundation](#)

Dissolving Boundaries

BY KAYLEIGH HALL

[Ilingworth Kerr Gallery](#)

The Queer NHL

BY LYN RICHARDS

[Kamloops Art Gallery](#)

Jagdeep Raina

BY YANI KONG

[Libby Leshgold Gallery \(formerly Charles H. Scott Gallery\)](#)

From the Editor - January 31, 2023 Issue

