

## VISUAL ARTS

# Photo finish

Campbell Wallace looks kindly upon his subjects

### DISTANTS

By Campbell Wallace, until May 7, Latitude 53 (2nd Floor, 10248-106 St), info: 423-5353

IT'S ALWAYS A LITTLE OF SHOCKING TO see yourself in photographs—almost no one looks on film the way they think they look in real life. So, just imagine encountering a snapshot of yourself scaled up to proportions large enough to hang over someone's couch. Except it's not a giant photo blow-up but a painted reproduction of a photo.

Campbell Wallace doesn't know most of the subjects who inhabit the paintings that make up *Distants*. His source materials for the oddly compelling portraits are what he classifies as "throwaways"—photographs that, for whatever reason, didn't make it into the album. Wallace has found his images in dumpsters and recycling bins, or friends who knew he was actively collecting photographic discards had given them to him. He then made almost perfect renditions of some of these pictures, right down to film-specific touches like lens flares and odd reflections and out-of-focus blurs.

### RESTRICTED RENDERING

"I've always been drawn to portrait work, but how do you make it relevant to everybody?" he asks. "I dabbled in abstract, but figure was my passion. But I didn't feel I had anything to say with it."

Figurative work is a hard sell anyway in a hypercritical university climate, but portraiture is an exponentially more difficult urge to explain. It's like bringing up your dwarf tossing or foot fetish at a cocktail party, eliciting silence, followed by a quick change of subject. It's not even usually talked about.

Wallace admits he was encouraged to explore his obsession with the figure during his stint at the University of Alberta, but he never really found a way to use the realist style he was working towards in a way that encompassed a larger art practice.

"They tried to avoid portrait work in university, but painting them gives you this inexhaustible supply of skin tones. I've been fascinated to no end by colour. I've always been interested in reproduction, experimenting with colour photocopy. And I like, for lack of a better word,

the 'abstract' aspect. That side of things has an impact on how I look at negative space," explains Wallace. "These seem more personal to me, and they also feel like more of a challenge, and I can say more than I could with a straight figure study."

### PUSHING PORTRAITURE

The artist admits to striving for populism. "I am hoping to try to bring portraiture to people. These [paintings] show people that they could know and situations they know. It's not like an Archduke or something else they can't relate to."

His paintings do seem familiar and do evoke an emotional response. Looking at the canvasses is akin to being dropped into the middle of a story as Wallace shies away from the formality of straight poses. In "Lucky Pierre" a husky and hairy gentleman lounges in his underwear on a bed, staring out of the picture with an unselfconscious goofy grin. "A Door" places the viewer into a relaxed and friendly house party. Perhaps the most affecting piece, "Do Not Discard," puts us in a hospital room, gazing on as a young, pretty blonde woman sleeps off some sort of medical emergency.

Of "Do Not Discard," Wallace says, "A friend said, 'It's beautiful, but I hate it.' And I thought that was great, not because I'm trying to repel people—I'm not—but I wanted to draw them in without giving them 'easy' subject matter."

"Everyone seems to have different interpretations of the work. I love that. Some people see somberness and isolation. Some people see humour," Wallace says. "I see both."

Even though he has never met most of the subjects, they are very much alive and real for Wallace.

"Choosing the images has been almost as important as the actual painting," he says, adding that he spends months looking at photographs while deciding which ones appeal to him aesthetically and which resonate emotionally. "I think they may be truer portraits because I don't know them. They aren't idealized. I can see why someone could be upset at the way they look, but I hope they would warm up to them. Everybody is amazing to me. Every one has beauty. And I have a huge degree of respect for my subjects."

CHRISTA O'KEEFE