

ETC



The Dark Side of our Culture

Natalie Reis: *As You Were*. USINE C. Montreal. September 8 — October 5, 2008

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Number 85, March–April–May 2009

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/34821ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Campbell, J. D. (2009). Review of [The Dark Side of our Culture / Natalie Reis: *As You Were*. USINE C. Montreal. September 8 — October 5, 2008]. *ETC*, (85), 44–45.



ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

Montreal

The Dark Side of our Culture

Natalie Reis: *As You Were*, USINE C,
Montreal. September 8 — October 5, 2008

In the remarkable canvases exhibited at Usine C, Natalie Reis demonstrated not only a salutary and signature fearlessness when it comes to embracing controversial subject matter, but also, and more importantly, proves that she possesses some consequential painting licks. Montreal-based Reis (who is represented in Montreal by Galerie Trois Points and had a solo last January), works in several media but her recent paintings were showcased here. She filters and channels media images that have surreal, oneiric and unavoidably dark (even spectral) overtones and undertows. She crosses borders with subversive intent, salvages provocative images from the popular culture that hold us in their sway and which are subject to visceral responses, and puts them to paint. In so doing she proves that she is, above all, entirely fearless.

As a resolute and savvy scavenger of media images and their human detritus (a serial killer, for instance) that have a comet-and-corona-like incendiary exhaust, Reis pushes our optic—and our noses—deep into the dank, wretched and even putrid underbelly of the popular culture. She heads straight for rupture, mayhem and the jugular. Decidedly, here is a painter who does not make nice.

In *The Hunter*, 2007, *Mouth to Mouth* 2007, and particularly, in the splendidly series *Homolka set of portraits*, Reis forces us to confront the dirty tail of the comet as it tears through our culture of excess: icons of evil, abjection and cultural exhaustion that have the unsettling power to jar and disturb, even as they subvert our presuppositions and assumptive contexts pertaining to late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century infocultural media life. Natalie Reis's paintings are notoriously edgy, no-holds-barred confrontations with the dark side of our culture. Not for the squeamish or those who seek easy answers, they refuse to shy away from controversy, and their rendering virtuosity assures them maximum impact.

In an epoch fraught with multilayered digitally altered and computer-generated realities that are borderline-received and often

unconsciously and uncritically digested by a wide public like so much sedimented imagistic pabulum, Reis uses said images to jolt us into sudden consciousness like an electrical discharge. She says: "In society's quest for constructed realism, we've achieved a widespread 'surreality' never before seen. In response to this development, I seek to present work that is transparent, rather than veiled, in its surrealistic intention."

Transparent it is. She consistently extracts images from their original contexts—both imagistic and assumptive—and imports them into paintings and drawings with telling precision and scintillating ulterior purpose. The originating imagery is quickly altered with paint but never pushed over the threshold of opacity. Reis's radiant intent is that the paint as well as what is painted are forced into the witness box of our own regard. In other words, both the role of the image as well as the paint regimen are placed in parentheses and radically questioned. In her own words:

"Paint is expected to please us, to depict or abstract, to be visceral or crass, illusionistic and so on. Here, paint seduces and offends at once, as it gentrifies a killer's portrait or leaves sweeping gashes across the head of a female torso. An unsettling dissonance occurs—a metaphor for the reflexive suspension of disbelief in the face of common visual language. A virtual gap is formed between the source image and its newly painted personification. Our notion of portraiture comes crashing down upon us, disrupting our preconceptions and invites us to enter a new awareness."

Perhaps the edgiest of the exhibited works and certainly those bound to be the most controversial are her portraits of serial killer Karla Homolka. At once eerily seductive and wholly offensive to the genteel sensibility, they leave their mark. Say better, their smudge, smear—or scar.

Karla Leanne Homolka, for the mercifully uninformed few who still do not know her rep, is an infamous 38-year-old Canadian serial killer who attracted global media attention when she was convicted of murdering two teenage girls. Homolka's husband and co-perp, Paul Bernardo, was also convicted of their murders. Both were responsible for the rape and death of Homolka's own sister. In return for her admission of guilt and testifying against her husband, she was offered a plea bargain, pleaded guilty to manslaughter and only served a dozen years in prison. She is now free and living in an undisclosed locale.

Reis's *Karla* portraits are unflinching and overwhelmingly critical in their purview. Homolka is recognizable, yes. But also somehow subject to painterly judgment, intervention and taxonomy; auto-debased, if you will, more than vilified, even defiled. And perhaps only a subject so reviled could provide the artist with ammunition enough to explode our presuppositions about the notion and nature of contemporary portraiture itself.

Concerning the works in *The Karla Project 'Got Face'* series, Reis's own words are consummately eloquent and worth quoting at some length:

"The appropriated photo in this series is one of the most notorious photos of Homolka. During the time of her trial and eventual release, in interviews, Homolka portrayed herself as an innocent, fragile girl—a contradiction of her true nature; that of an accomplice, a murderer. In this particular photo, Homolka was most likely photographed in the midst of a blink, leaving her to appear possessed or evil—this is the image that is etched in our minds. Unlike other photos (I'm thinking of a photo of Homolka in her jail cell, laying on her stomach on her cell bed with her feet up in the air and a big smile across her face, her hands nicely placed under her chin), the image I have used lends itself to the description we know. The photo has been repetitively replicated in these paintings as a means to reference the



origin and nature of the source photo used widely in mainstream media.”

She continues:

“[My] paint adorns Homolka’s face, her eyes, her neck, sometimes expels from her orifices or enwraps and covers her face. Sometimes she is painted, sometimes she is paint. Does the paint mock or demean the highly charged association we have with this image? What is in an image? Is this a portrait? What is a portrait?”

These salient questions ricochet within the peripheries of these paintings—and our own minds—as though within a firing range. Reis knows well that Homolka’s awful iconic image has uneasily settled into our consciousness, and begun its slow descent into the collective unconscious like a death image or mirage, where it disturbs and unsettles, even as they continue to remind us of all the powers of horror. Reis opens and holds taut the gap between the internet archival images of Homolka and her painted ‘personifications’.

One could cite the work of UK painter and fellow traveler Marcus Harvey, whose portraits of serial killers earned him certain notoriety in Britain. His *Myra*, a reproduction of a police photograph of the infamous Myra Hindley (a child serial-killer involved in the ‘Moors murders’), exacerbates in felt intensity the longer one looks at it. Similarly, Reis’s portraits of Homolka have a consummate spookiness that is identifiable as such even if that reviled visage was not immediately identifiable within our own heads as being Karla Homolka. They live on inside your head with a weird tenacity long after one has left the exhibition hall.

Reis refuses to glorify through representational ploys nor does she further instantiate the iconic through licentious usage. She seems to say that the transformation of Homolka into a pop culture icon of evil incarnate is as invidious as it is picayune and profane. She seems to be saying: “Here is the face of pure evil. Assimilate...and, if you can, understand these images that you have been fed by the mass media 24/7.” And hers’ is no panacea, but a deliberate and effective strategy of provocation and subversion. In the process of painting, Homolka is reviled and abased, yes, but the big balloon of portrait painting is itself punctured like a *piñata*, exposed as being, as it were, its own straw man.

It should be stressed that Reis is not at all interested in giving us the visual arts equivalent to a film like Joel Bender’s *Karla* (2006), a tawdry biopic told from the killer’s point of view and which has been justifiably criticized. Nor does she essay anything like Carol Bolt’s play *Famous*, produced in Toronto at the Tarragon Theatre (1997), or Lynn Crosbie’s novel *Paul’s Case* (Insomniac Press, 1997),



both based on the Homolka/Bernardo atrocities. Given their repulsive subject matter, all three—film, play and book—met with a very chilly reception. While their authors perhaps showed considerable courage in coming to terms with the issue of violence and Homolka’s deviant behavior, they were all intrinsically flawed.

Now, Natalie Reis shares their fearlessness but not their opportunism. A visual artist, she works from a separate place, has a different intention, and one of overwhelming criticality. She goes where angels fear to tread in order to upset the applecart full of our preconceived notions about paint, painting, portrait-making—and imagistic excess. She wants to turn her high-magnification lens on painting itself and uses as cannon fodder a particularly ‘loaded’ image in order to do so. She wants to call down our conventional understanding of ‘portraiture’ today, in an image-mediated, media-fraught culture. She possesses in spades strong guts wed to real painting licks.

Her paintings of Karla Homolka are bound to raise controversy. They are provocative, after all. But they are also, and more importantly, as she herself says, meant to offend, upset, sully. They mean to turn on its head the issue of painting—portraiture—as some glorious and pristine enterprise, and to make us question and rethink its verities, even as they reveal its dirty secrets through summoning up from the morass of the recent past the face of one of this country’s most infamous serial killers. It is no surprise that Reis was painter Marc Séguin’s assistant. She shares with Séguin, that wily traveler through the oppressive darkness of our culture, a fearless mien and an instinctive way with the drawn and the painted. No question: here is an artist whose *dé-marche* one must watch.

JAMES D. CAMPBELL