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angela grossmann

by sean starke

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Vancouver-based painter Angela Grossman has had an international reputation since the late 1980s, yet still remains somewhat obscure in her adopted home of Canada. In fact, Grossmann is so much better known and appreciated in Europe that in a survey published by *The Art Newspaper* last year, British art students from eleven of the UK's leading art schools included her on the list of 100 artists that had most inspired and influenced their work.

Grossmann's studio sits above Cordova Street in Vancouver's Gastown and is small but bright with south-facing windows that reach the ceiling. Although it is not as messy as she warned me it would be – "I tidied up!" – there are discreet piles everywhere:

obsessive creative tangents collected for work. She clears an extra chair, and we talk about German aesthetics, about how much she loves Paris above all cities, and about

the supremacy of Andrei Tarkovsky's films. A serendipitous anecdote: while she was living in Paris, Tarkovsky's still photographer lived across the hall. Sometimes the world is perfect.



Born in London in 1955, Grossmann grew up surrounded by art. "My parents were both artists: my father the graphic kind, my mother the expressive kind. My grandfather on my mother's side was a painter and my grandmother on the other was an art collector before she died in the camps. My parents were bohemian leftist intellectual politicians. My mother was in charge of painting all the posters and banners for the anti-war movement (lots of skulls and bombs) which seemed like its headquarters were in our house in London. My mother had covered every inch of wall in our house in heavily painted murals (more skulls and bombs) so we were notorious in the neighbourhood and the other children were forbidden by their parents to enter our home." Eventually the family moved to Canada where Angela initially chose a different path for herself, "Of course I had no desire to follow in their footsteps, so I rebelled and went to journalism school." After receiving her BA in Journalism from Ryerson University in Toronto, Grossmann took what proved to be a fateful trip to Vancouver in 1981. "My sister had just had a baby, and I was at a very loose end. The drive went from a very frigid grey Toronto to a very verdant green blossoming Vancouver in February – needless to say, I never went back." Her sister hated the city and moved to France but Grossmann stayed and was accepted to the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design (then named Emily Carr College of Art and Design) based on the strength of some drawings she had showed them. "My sister left for France and marooned me here, happily strange in a strange land with no living relative for four thousand miles." This sense of being 'marooned', remote from the family except

through history, is a theme that crops up often in Grossmann's work.

Grossmann first came into wide public recognition in the summer 1985 as one of the eight (lamentably named) "Young Romantics" exhibited at the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG). Curated by Scott Watson, the show is now notorious for helping launch the careers of some of Canada's brightest art stars. Grossmann and three others included in the show – Graham Gillmore, Attila Richard Lukacs, and Derek Root – were all classmates attending the Emily Carr Institute who were working and exhibiting together under the moniker *Futura Bold*. (Also involved was the wayward "fifth Beatle" of the group, as he calls himself, novelist Douglas Coupland, who at that time was studying sculpture.) Although Grossmann was around five years older than her peers in *Futura Bold*, she says that it made little difference – "girls are always more mature than boys anyways." This loose collective was joined together by an approach more than a specific style: a kind of return-to-painting philosophy that saw the creation of large-scale pieces filled with gestural brush strokes and personal expression. To many, this passionate practice can be seen as a reaction to the cold conceptualism that had seized visual art in the 80's – particularly the photoconceptual work of artists like Jeff Wall, Stan Douglas, and Rodney Graham that became known as the "Vancouver School." Aesthetic differences aside, Grossmann is glad the Vancouver School exists: "They've brought a lot of sophisticated attention to Vancouver which remains remote and a bit provincial."

In *Futura Bold*, Grossmann was most kindred with Lukacs, who is best known for his homoerotic paintings of neo-Nazi skinheads and military men. They were very competitive but also collaborative, "Attila would get me to help him sketch things out, because he couldn't draw the way I could." Indeed, Grossmann was often singled out as uniquely gifted in this group, yet her international reputation has not translated into the same curatorial acceptance in Canada that the others enjoy. I asked Grossmann what might have hampered her success in Canada. Without a moment's pause she replied, "Being a woman." And she is right. While the familiarity of these other artists has reached the stratosphere, incredibly few female artists from Vancouver have broken into popular recognition. This is the history of art but it still leads Grossmann's Vancouver dealer and long-time champion, Diane Farris, to seem a bit disdainful about how underrepresented Grossmann is at the VAG. Not a surprising reaction considering that, while the other members of *Futura Bold* are all included in the VAG's permanent collection, the city's official gallery has, to date, never purchased a Grossmann piece.

In her recent collections, *Paper Dolls* (2006) and *Alpha Girls* (2004), Grossmann captures that transitory stage in the lives of girls when they stand between childhood and adolescence. Essentially figurative, the paintings are frank presentations of girls alone and in small groups, against abstracted backgrounds that occasionally include small shocks of black or colour. Some pieces convey the ruthless competition among girls and their peers, others explore the ambiguity-of-self experienced by girls whose bodies have begun to achieve a certain amount of erotic allure, but who are themselves still unaware of its meaning or power. Their narrative intimacy is somewhat startling: awkward in adult eveningwear, a girl stands hesitantly, unsure of her body; three girls raise their chins imperiously at those who are less popular; feigning confidence, one impertinent girl meets our



eyes as a prop cigarette burns in her fingers. The surfaces of these paintings are layered and complexly constructed as she tends to incorporate found materials. And she never works on fresh, blank canvases. It seems she will paint on anything else – photographs, old paper, bed sheets, the insides of suitcases – except new, stretched canvases. “I’ve never wanted to work on a pristine piece of canvas. It didn’t appeal. Horrible! I like there to be a bit of history, and the work to be in communication with something that had happened before, so it’s not just a conversation I start on my own. Even when I work on canvas, it’s not just canvas, it’s tent canvas or an old surveiller’s canvas.”

Grossmann collages faces together from photocopies of old photographs in a way that is subtle and coherently representational, playing at transparency. “I collage the figures from a million different sources. What acts as a leg in one is not a leg; I put in boys bits for girls. If you look at collage of the earlier practitioners – whom I love – they used it for a strange, shattering effect, with say a huge head and tiny body, that kind of thing. I wanted to use my collage so that it appeared to make sense, but actually didn’t. I found it much more exciting to have it look real.” She calls this process ‘painting with photography’, I draw and paint with the photograph, and then re-photograph, then I blow it up, and I keep drawing and painting.”

Much of the strange allure of the girl paintings derives from Grossmann’s formal strategy of combining these photographic faces with bodies that are expressionistically figurative and painterly. “I wanted to use people that were real, so I started using photographs of people that actually lived, but I didn’t want to use their bodies. Often a body in a photograph is boring. It will not lend itself to the imagination in the way that a body I invent can – a body that has a language to it that says something like a face does. So I construct the body. It speaks with my gesture.” Organized vertically from top to bottom, often these gestural bodies gradually become ambiguous,

descending into an unfinished state of pure line. Profoundly thematic, this Cartesian distinction between head and body, and the unfinished lines of the girls' figures, communicates the physical transformation that we see frozen in time before our eyes. The moment of 'becoming'.

Grossmann is too sincere an artist to be didactic, but there is definitely a critical edge to her depictions of pre-teens wearing women's accessories and, in some cases, lingerie. Her paintings articulate the distinction between the sexuality of children and the sexualization of children. *Paper Dolls* in particular, with titles like *La Senza Girl*, points out how popular culture today is marketing sex to pre-teens, and thus closing that window of time in which a pubescent child can remain oblivious to her incipient sexual identity. "This whole thing about throwing girls into this awareness so early before they can in any way appreciate it or equalize it, is very strange." While the girls in Grossmann's paintings are aware of being watched and judged, of becoming objects of visual pleasure or public scorn, the situation is complex and they reveal a variety of emotional worlds, from the confused to the curious. It is ironic that in the popular culture of the 1970s, the heyday of Laura Mulvey and feminist critiques on visual objectification, there was license to explore these themes in explicit ways utterly taboo today (think a nude twelve year-old Brooke Shields in *Pretty Baby*), but unlike Grossmann, such expositions were done in a faux-innocent manner that hid – like all utopian liberalities hungover from the 1960s – the more sinister, damaging aspects. Most importantly, in this context alone, Grossmann succeeds in walking a very fine line of representing the erotics of pubescence and voyeurism without offering the viewer an experience that is itself erotic. She avoids, in other words, having the paintings actually function as the voyeuristic pleasure and displeasure they describe.

The best pieces from *Paper Dolls* and *Alpha Girls* have sold; a few that haven't are at the Diane Farris Gallery. Having gone through her archives – including the basement crypt, which holds almost thirty years of Vancouver artists' ephemera, there are pieces that were never shown. However, there is one that was exhibited in Toronto that I'm particularly hoping to see: *Pink*. With a self-deprecating "Oh God, alright", Grossmann obliges me by finding the painting. An anomaly, the figure is in profile standing against a background of bright reddish-pink. Initially the girl appears naked but upon closer inspection her body is a hollow silhouette, like a keyhole, beneath which is a photograph of a man's face. (The man, incidentally, is one of the prisoners from her 1999/2000 collection, *Corection(s)*.) The girl is standing very erect and she is vomiting. Rough brush strokes of orange and pink are projecting straight from her mouth. Grossmann has described the girl in *Pink* as "childlike but outraged by her body and its transformations." Fantastical and wretched, violent and true, the painting is very affecting, "The good thing is that the very powerful and dark stuff somehow never sells. People don't want to live with it."

Although *Pink* is the kind of work that Grossmann holds dearest as the most expressive of what she can say as an artist, it is also the kind that might not be shown through (or even to) some of her usual dealers. For a gallery to accept a painting for exhibition there has to be a fit, and that fit necessarily includes the possibility that the gallery can sell it. As Grossmann puts it, "the only reason dealers love the series of girls, is because they can sell them on a very cosmetic level. People say 'Oh, aren't they lovely! Oh, I love these!' People don't even know why they like them. They say, 'there's something about this I'm drawn to, but I don't know what it is.'" As a younger artist Grossmann used to push the more challenging, and let's say, less commercial pieces on some of her dealers, trying to get them to see their aesthetic value. She's over that now, she says, and simply shows different work to different dealers.

Whether it's one of the *Alpha Girls*, or a seemingly charming man like *Fritz* (2006), as a rule Grossmann's paintings are much darker than they first appear. The daughter of a German Jew, many critics see references to the Holocaust in her paintings; although she denies any direct references, she admits to its subterranean influence on her creative consciousness. The more explicitly communicated themes, strangely absent from most descriptions of her work, are nostalgia, and indeed death. When this is brought up, she laughs, "It's huge. It's obsessed with it!" In the girl paintings, for instance, death is metaphorically present in the depiction of that transformative moment when the girl's identity as a child dies forever. "Youth, it is incredibly brief, and you can see it fading as you are looking at it. It's that part that entrances me. It is like seeing the transfer to death, it is. That's what makes it sad, I think." Death is also present in her paintings in a very literal way, for the young faces in the antique photographs she uses are those of people now elderly or dead. The choice of old, abandoned photographs is a conscious strategy on Grossmann's part. "I often try and get a sense of a time that is usually not now. The past. Photography is like looking at the dead, like looking at yourself." This echoes Susan Sontag in *On Photography*: "Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own

destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people.”

By now the afternoon light in the studio is itself dying. Finally, Grossmann shows me the beginnings of her next series. Works in progress, stacked in a pile one on top of the other, they are paintings of... boys. Young, figurative boys with earnest photo-faces. They stand with coiled energy, they hold up balloonish boxing gloves, they are physical. “I think it will be called Swagger,” she says, “it is usually boys and often they are boxing.” Seeing the pattern, I ask how she might describe the development of her work over the past twenty years. “My facility is at its peak, I would say that. My line is at its peak. I know what I want in the emotional range, and I can get to it quicker.”