

ARTS

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The Polymorphines have developed a more comfortable sound, E3

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2009

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THE OTTAWA CITIZEN, SECTION I

Our Bodies, Ourselves

Two exhibits explore the feminine mystique



PAUL GESSELL
ART & THE CITY

Consider it an exhibition spread across two venues, although it wasn't planned that way. And let's call the two far-flung shows, to borrow a phrase from Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.

At Patrick Mikhail Gallery in the South Keys area, there is the high-tech photo-based work of Ottawa's Chantal Gervais, exploring the very interior of her body through life-sized inkjet prints of MRI scans.

At Galerie St. Laurent-Hill in the ByWard Market, a new exhibition by Gatineau's Isabelle Gauvreau explores the souls of women through life-sized, mixed-media drawings and paintings of the nude female form.

"It's time women talked about their own bodies," Gauvreau said in an interview at her home studio, as she discussed some of the large-scale works on wood panel and on paper that will be unveiled today at St. Laurent-Hill. And that's what Gauvreau and Gervais are doing.

Men have been talking about and painting women's bodies for centuries. Their take on women has not always sat comfortably with the women themselves. This is because the traditional male gaze tends to emphasize women's passive sexuality rather than the kind of powerful sensuality that cloaks Gauvreau's life-sized drawings of archetypal women.

The faces of Gauvreau's women are hidden, giving them an air of mystery and universality. Gauvreau



Gatineau artist Isabel Gauvreau's life-sized works of Amazon-type women exude an air of mystery and a powerful sensuality.

The exhibits

Chantal Gervais: At Patrick Mikhail Gallery, 2401 Bank St. in the South Keys area

Information: Continues until March 2

Isabelle Gauvreau: At Galerie St. Laurent-Hill, 293 Dalhousie St. in the ByWard Market

Information: Opens today and continues until March 4.

finds faces distracting. Faces are equated with portraits of specific individuals, she says. Gauvreau is more interested in creating ethereal Divine Goddesses, manifestations of Mother Nature and other ancient, iconic, female figures.

Gauvreau tends to decorate her women with lace, gold leaf and other elements that emphasize old-fashioned femininity. This is one artist unafraid to celebrate the differences between men and women. The backgrounds of Gauvreau's

work are often dark in theme and in colour. Her women have surfaced victorious from adversities. They are more Amazons than wimps. Across Ottawa, Chantal Gervais focuses attention on her own stripped-down body. On one dra-

matic wall at Patrick Mikhail Gallery, there are three life-sized inkjet prints of Gervais's insides created by MRI scans. One highlights the fat inside Gervais.

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Art: Brave new departure for artist

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A second presents her liquids. A third is concerned with bones. The works are amazingly alluring, haunting and spiritual. They are like some high-tech Turin's shroud or the X-rays of some saint ascending into heaven. One is almost tempted to bow down and worship these images.

In fact, according to Gervais's dealer, Patrick Mikhail, the artist is colourizing some prints of her MRI scans for a future exhibition, turning them into art that resembles church-like stained glass windows.

These self-portraits represent a brave new departure for Gervais, who is best known for her photographic examinations of human flesh. Previous exhibitions in Ottawa and beyond have included images of the aging body, the wounded body, the healing body.

In the past, Gervais has aimed her camera at the bodies of others. Finally, the artist is willing to confront her own body, to peel back every layer and reveal herself to the world.

This is akin to celebrated artist Alex Colville, at age 80, painting a self-portrait of himself in the nude a few years ago, as if to say: "Here I am; take me, despite the sagging flesh and surgical scars."

In Gervais's case, she is still holding back part of herself. The dance of the seven veils is not yet complete.

A fourth life-sized image in the Patrick Mikhail exhibition is titled *Vitruvian Me*. That title is a reference to the much reproduced, late 15th-century drawing by Leonardo da Vinci called *The Vitruvian Man*, a standing, full-frontal male nude sporting four outstretched arms and four legs.

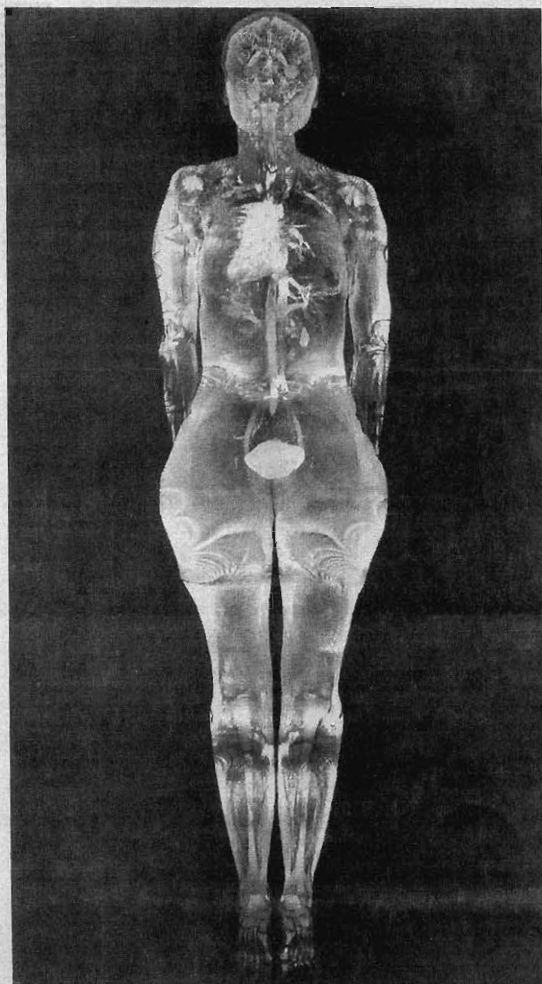
Gervais has created a life-sized digital composite photograph of her exterior self in a Vitruvian Man posture, complete with four arms and four legs.

Her self-portrait is actually composed of individual scans of her body imperfectly fitted to one another, as if the woman in the picture is being deconstructed or is about to be reconstructed. By manipulating these images, Gervais is still hiding part of her true self through some photographic wizardry.

The Patrick Mikhail exhibition is called *Anatomy: In Ruins and Remade*. The show also includes digitized anatomical imagery from another Ottawa artist, Cindy Stelmackowich, a specialist in medically-themed art.

For this exhibition, Stelmackowich is presenting more of her ongoing, much-acclaimed, photo-based *Disaster Series*, in which old scenes of war and natural disasters are imposed upon digitized anatomical drawings from 19th-century medical texts.

Gervais's exhibition at Patrick Mikhail Gallery, 2401 Bank St., continues until March 2. Gauthier's show at St. Laurent-Hill, 297 Dalbousie St., opens today and continues until March 4.



Chantal Gervais's self-portraits are a brave new departure for the artist, who is best known for her photographic examinations of human flesh.