

VISUAL ARTS » REVIEW

A Painter at the drawing board



GARY MICHAEL DAULT GALLERY GOING

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LUKE PAINTER AT ANGELL GALLERY

\$2,000-\$18,000. Until Aug. 1,
890 Queen St. W., Toronto;
416-530-0444

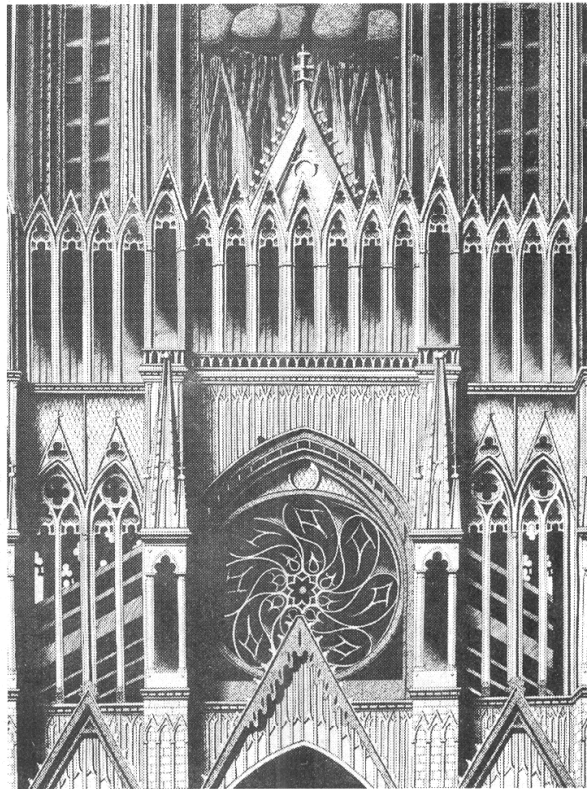
The fact the conveniently named artist Luke Painter no longer makes paintings but instead produces only elaborate, exacting drawings hints at the delicious perversity that powers his art.

In this age of the short attention span and almost universal computer assistance in art-making, Painter labours at the obsessively hand-made. "I guess I could have done all this digitally," he tells me on the phone from his Toronto studio – we were talking about his two exhaustingly complex *Rural Gothic Reversal* drawings in India ink that anchor Painter's exhibition, *Revival-esque*, now at Toronto's Angell Gallery – "but there is a sense of craft that interests me, an aspect of labour that reflects the way the real buildings were actually made."

The "real buildings" are, of course, Gothic cathedrals. One of Painter's labour-intensive drawings of them shows the facade of a cathedral standing majestically before a forest of tightly crowded, almost absurdly tall and highly stylized trees. In its companion drawing – hung on the gallery's opposite wall – instead of gazing at the building's facade, you are inside the cathedral, looking out.

The odd thing about this second drawing, however, is the great church seems to be filled, not with vaulting Gothic space, but rather with more trees, which have been somehow pulled aside, like curtains, to give you a view out the cathedral's big rose window and back into the surrounding forest. Clearly, Painter has done his research. The drawings are almost literal demonstrations of widely held ideas (by, for example, Victorian theorists Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and John Ruskin) that the essential, vertically aspiring Gothic shape comes originally from trees, its high, pointed arches being an elaboration of the lashing together of two trees at their tops).

But the exhibition *Revival-*



One drawing (of two) from Luke Painter's *Rural Gothic Reversal*.

esque is about more than Gothic cathedrals.

For one thing, it offers equally meticulous India ink drawings that speak to various cultural periods and bring what Painter calls "a certain collapsing of high and low" to the exhibition. His twinned portrait drawings, *Bust 1* & *Bust 2*, for example, offer two views of a rather dashingly romantic young man (Painter describes him as "Byronic" or as "Shelley-esque"): In the first, he faces out into the gallery, while in the second, his head is turned back toward the wall. Nearby, is a drawing called *Celia* – of a rather manish, clearly disgruntled young woman with *Bride of Frankenstein* hair wearing a thick hairy coat – based, according to the artist, on his favourite contestant from the reality TV program *America's Next Top Model* (Cycle 12).

What is to be made of this pageant of Gothicism through the ages? For Painter, it's all about "revival aspiration," about the persistence of an art spirit self-consciously "out of step with time." Painter insists, in the design of his exhibition, that the works talk to one another in the gallery space (the reversed cathedrals and the varieties of persistent, revisited Gothicism), and that the viewers follow this fugue-in-time –

to the point of accepting that culture is circular. Whether we call it the "eternal return" or merely "nostalgia," there are ideas and modes of expression (such as the Gothic) that won't go away. And nobody is more delighted about this than Painter.

**SYLVIE BÉLANGER
AT BIRCH LIBRALATO**
\$550-\$8,500. Until July 25,
129 Tecumseth St., Toronto;
416-365-3003

If, for some perverse reason, you were trying to irritate artist Sylvie Bélanger, you could manage it by referring to her brilliant exhibition, *Des Fleurs Pour Décorer* or *Home Decor*, as an exhibition she has curated.

For while the exhibition does feature works by a number of other artists (Michael Beitz, June Pak, Jacob Kassay, Cathy Daley, Ginette Légaré, Benjamin Van Dyck, James Nizam, Michelle Gay and Paul de Guzman), as well as by Bélanger herself, the "concept and design" of the exhibition is wholly Bélanger's. And a remarkably smart and telling concept it is.

What Bélanger has done is to turn Birch Libralato from a gallery into a "space model," reminiscent of the "unit models" that serve to represent

the future living space that "people visit before the purchase of a condo or loft."

To that end, Bélanger has provided room-like areas within the gallery – each dominated by large plasma screens – within which prospective clients for Bélanger's fictive hyper-aestheticized living-spaces-to-come can try out possible styles, colours, pieces of furniture and, above all, works of art (thus the available examples by the other artists from whom Bélanger has invited contributions).

The exhibition offers an engagingly odd form of consumer freedom, an essentially ersatz freedom of choice in which the client is offered an opportunity to dream somebody else's dream of design and, consequently, to acquire a previously untried "lifestyle." Ironically, all the art Bélanger has assembled (and the material available within the on-screen menus offered on the three monitors) is invariably more powerful and more provocative than the conventional desires that make up "decor." And so, in the end, *Des Fleurs Pour Décorer* is more darkly satirical of and gleefully destructive of ideas about consumer aspiration than it is any sort of hymn to our culture's embrace of design as a new route to moral improvement.

**DENISE HAWRYSIO
AT OPEN STUDIO**
\$300-\$800. Closes today,
401 Richmond St. W., Suite 104,
Toronto; 416-504-8238

This refreshingly witty and provocative exhibition pushes the possibilities of the normally recalcitrant medium of etching into unexplored realms (note, for example, her wicked parody of high conceptualism in her *Brick with the marks of its making and unmaking*).

Because etching is about what you scratch on the plate from which you will eventually print, this "scratching" is usually about carefully deliberated passages of aesthetic mark-making. Not Hawryσιο's. Her etching plates are passive receivers of her lived activity, bearing, for example, *Finger marks from the guy whose job I stole* and *Marks from the chip that fell off my shoulder*. It's all quite ruefully funny, but it's also, more importantly, about your vulnerability in a dangerous world, about being constantly conscious of the things that happen to you. In the end, therefore, it's a lonely show, brave, funny and moving.