

arts

Pondering portraiture at Dal Art Gallery

by Jack

What do arts editors do when they feel down? Well, we take the miserable excuses for ourselves to the gallery and surround ourselves with art. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, it reminds us that we have responsibilities to our respective publications, and further, that we have deadlines to meet before the next issue. Secondly, and self-defeatingly, when arts editors find themselves surrounded by immortal works that they themselves are unable to produce we are reduced to what most of us actually are. And that is, mere bystanders. Journalism is mere bystanderism.

Robert Harris wasn't a bystander. No, he was interesting. I wish I were as interesting as Robert Harris. Robert Harris is so interesting that I don't think he ever experienced any trouble getting friends to play with. Or a finding a wife to live in bliss with for that matter. He was from Charlottetown, PEI which is interesting: I know lots of nice people from there. He was also born in 1849 which is interesting because I wasn't even born then. He lived until he died. Apparently he was killed by the number 1919.

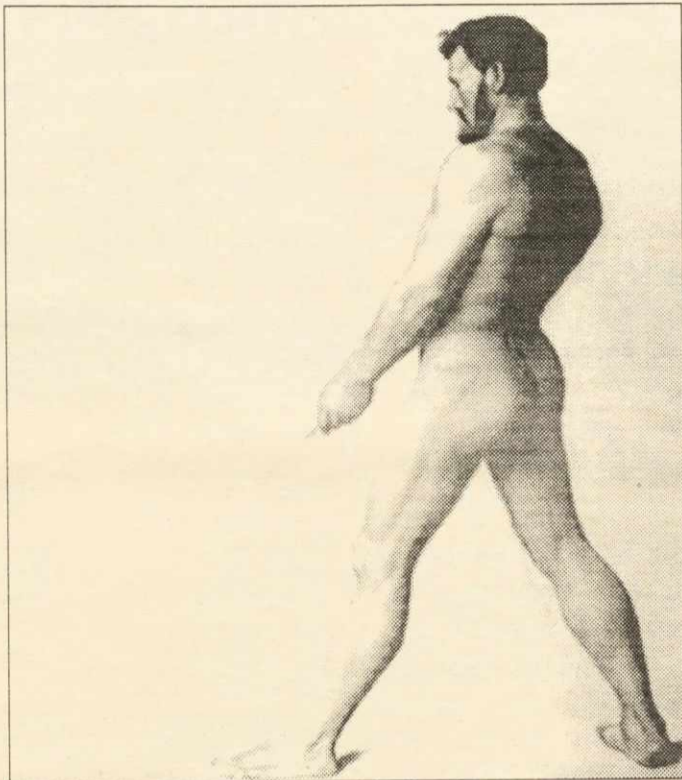
This exhibition includes very much planning and coordination indeed. Dalhousie Art Gallery curator Susan Gibson Garvey has had much to do with many things. So much so that she wasn't even around to talk with. Oh well, I thought. I'll just have to wing it. Besides I've grown quite accustomed to talking to myself.

Robert Harris studied at a very intense art college in Europe. It was very rigorous and from the looks of it, a tedious process, evident by the overwhelming amount of charcoals on paper entitled "studies". It was later explained to me that artists in those days (I don't have a clue what they do now) had to draw skeleton after skeleton until they were ready for Hallowe'en, or All Hallow's Eve as they called it in those days. Then after doing their honour's thesis in bones galore, they move on to do really, really skinny people for a master's, right? No. The artists (both male and female I hope) then moved on to do intricate muscle and tissue studies. And then body parts and then nudes (XXX). Yup, I warned ya. There is them there nudes at the Dal Gallery again.

Harris was twenty-eight when he left for gay Paris. It was the colder part of 1877. He enrolled in the Atelier of Leon Bonnat, which was sort of like the SMU Journal of Paris art schools. However it was good for his work, and now we can say - as bystanders remember - that it's good for us too. Harris had a chance, when in France, to receive some grants, and put them in, his bohemian pants.

Seriously though, of his portraiture... they all (the sitters or models) have these pensive, disinterested gazes. Could it be that Harris was a poor conversationalist? Maybe he asked them the meaning of life or

something? Come to think of it, I have grown rather pensive standing in the gallery. Why, not two or three weeks ago the woman whose very presence shot me into instant bliss gave me the "Hit the Road Jack" in a



perfect four-four count. Disinterested? Heck! I'm so far down in a mind-numbing trance that my cold stary gaze can't be broken long enough to eat.

So in the gallery I find myself: looking rather bewildered at a bunch of NASCAD students taking an overpriced lesson in mimesis (apish imitation). The whole lot of them are 'gouping' (new word) about the naughty bits of the nudes while your humble narrator moves around scratching on his recycled scratch pad. A life study here, a life study

there, an amazing likeness to a person in my aesthetics class. What kind of head space am I getting myself into here? Oh! an oil on panel in the middle of a bunch of charcoal on paper: what a pleasant surprise!

Hurry to see the show folks! It won't last long. And if it does it isn't my fault: I'm just a very solitary bystander.

Robert Harris: Figure Work is at the Dalhousie Art Gallery until April 11. Please note that the gallery will be closed on Good Friday, April 9, but it will be open on Easter Sunday, April 11.

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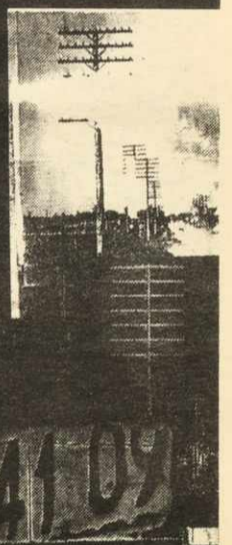
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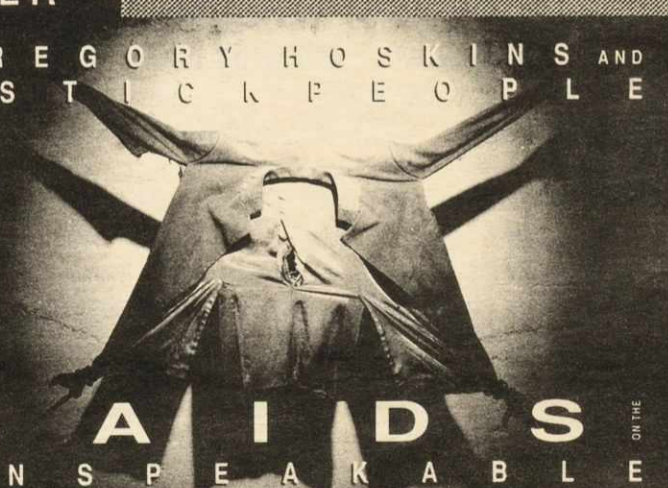
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