

ARTS WATCH



BARE BEAUTY: THE MUSEUM IS THE SETTING FOR AN EXHIBITION OF PERFORMANCE VIDEOS

ADAD HANNAH PRESENTS 19TH-CENTURY FREEZE- FRAMES AT SAW GALLERY

The art museum itself is the *mise-en-scène* for a series of real-time, performance videos by Montreal artist Adad Hannah at SAW Gallery. Hannah posed models in constructed sets in the Baroque galleries of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and continuously videotaped them for an average of five minutes each. At first glance the projections look like photographs or film stills, but a closer inspection reveals movement in the nearly life-size projections — a shifting of body weight, a twitching muscle or a blinking eye.

Hannah contemporizes the 19th-century theatrical practice of *tableaux vivant* where models imitated cultural icons, works of art and literature by holding poses for extended periods of time, creating literally living pictures.

"They are never slowed down or sped up or digitally altered," said Hannah in an interview at the gallery. "It's so easy to do digital trickery, but it was important for me that they remained pure."

The exhibition titled *Stills* is curated by Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick who are known collectively as DisplayCult. The Montreal duo examined *tableaux vivant* format in previous exhibitions including *Museopathology*, named exhibition of the year for 2002 by the Ontario Association of Art Galleries. "In museums there's a kind of code; you look at art or disengage," Drobnick said.

"There's a sense of decorum, a museum etiquette. We are interested in states of being in the museum."

Two videos are simultaneously projected onto adjacent walls in two cycles, the first cycle depicting an over-emotional identification or engagement with the art and the second presenting a blasé state where the performers appear disengaged and uninterested. In *Portrait of A Gentleman*, a naked man lunges across a fallen velvet rope barrier toward a painting (with the same title) — presumably to couple with the portrait — as two museum guards attempt to stop him.

"There's a sustained moment that unfolds and brings to the fore the living presence of the model," Fisher said. "With *tableaux vivant* there is a narrative that is implied in the gestures, there is a past one can imagine leading up to this event and a future that follows," Drobnick added.

In the video called *4 Chairs*, performers sit in leather chairs each facing a different direction. Disengaged and slightly zoned out, the models seem alone even though they inhabit a shared public space. "Video tends to flatten things out and here the performers tend to get flattened out into the same ontological realm as the painting," said Drobnick.

Stills by Adad Hannah continues at SAW Gallery (67 Nicholas St.) until September 28.



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