

Review in the Globe and Mail, October 10, 2010

Fiona Ackerman at Parts Gallery

Until Oct. 10, 1150 Queen St. E., Toronto; www.partsgallery.ca

Vancouver-based painter Fiona Ackerman's new acrylics on canvas, currently on display at Parts Gallery, are an excellent example of what psychologists call "associational logic."

When you describe the individual parts of a given Ackerman painting, then add said parts together, the math ought not to hold. But her paintings do cohere, and cohere wonderfully, largely because they remain true to their own interior, wholly idiosyncratic, systems of logic. Ackerman is a brave painter – always walking the dental-floss-thin tightrope between expertly composed and total train wreck.



Fiona Ackerman's "Rooftop Eden" (acrylic on canvas)

In one painting alone, I found half loops and dendrites, sharp barbershop stripes and splayed, wobbly brush strokes, speckles against scales and flame licks paired with waves – and nothing seemed out of place. Ackerman's mad colour combinations, cement greys sidling up to neons, tangerines making nice with paper-bag browns, would cause sensible colour theorists to throw up their twiggy arms in high dismay. But Ackerman makes the odd couples dance, mostly by knowing exactly how much ballroom floor space to give them.

It takes a lot of careful planning to make a painting come across as both superficially haphazard and, on further inspection, deeply studied. I suspect Ackerman scrapes off as much paint as she applies. One of her key strategies, I'm guessing, is to compose each painting around a central organic form, or cluster of forms, and then build out from that point.

The result of all this careful planning is, perversely, a set of paintings that carry the loose, shifting and untrustworthy physics of free-association daydreaming. The works also remind me, weirdly enough, of the interiors of aquariums, those microcosmic seascapes made up of luridly coloured, hyper-artificial coral and flora. Pity the paintings are not waterproof.

Fiona Ackerman's "Rooftop Eden" (acrylic on canvas)