

It is widely recognized that the evolution of feminist art practices during the 1980s witnessed an increasing move into mediums other than painting, among them video, performance and textual works. Employing other mediums became a means of working outside of painting's male dominated history, a long burdened history which, primarily due to the social roles placed upon women, provided little inclusion for them in the first place. In spite of this many women are painting, but the number who consciously contend with their exclusion from the history of painting are few. In this respect, the potential for women to position themselves within the realm of painting is considerable.

As a painter, Mina Totino's critical base does not arise from a denial of painting's history. Over the past decade, she has drawn upon various seminal moments in the "official" history of painting — the genres of still



life, the heroics of Abstract Expressionism, and the finality of the monochrome. But she has made these moments problematic by incorporating elements that are commonly considered feminine; images of women, fashion accessories and decorative patterns. As well, she brings into her paintings a kind of sensuality that both beckons and confronts the pleasure of looking in a way that is unapologetic and runs counter to some of the traditional aversions that have typified much feminist ethos. The colour and textures of makeup, piles of just-dropped silky lingerie, jewellery and tattoos have all emerged as emblems of sensuality within Totino's painting surface questioning who determines what is feminine and where the construction of femininity lies.

The representation of women as relayed through popular culture in films, books, music, magazines and the mass media and then discussed by feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis and Mary Ann Doane has influenced Totino's approach to painting. Each of these theorists analyze how the filmic narrative, fashion photography and advertising have projected women as erotic and ornamented decoys who carry out roles of seductive femininity that play upon the desires of the viewer. These roles have become instilled as commonplace signs of female sensuality but have been revealed as artificial constructions.

They remain a part of the social psyche, however, and Totino explores the ambivalence between a critique and an acceptance of, even a desire for, these icons of sensuality.

Sensuality is indeed a volatile subject. Sensuality toys with the titillation of seduction while courting a play of power games. Totino recognizes that the experience of sensuality has complex and mucky mechanisms; her paintings provoke various readings of what sensuality might be rather than determine what sensuality is. She conveys sensuality as charged with paradox. Pleasure is evident in both her paint surface and her subject matter, but she suggests that the submission to pleasure is not without its threats and dangers. Submission to pleasure can override a critical perspective when one is in a state of rapture. Totino plays with seduction but then confuses it through a strategy of image fragmentation that unsettles a comfortable reception to either aesthetic pleasure or content.



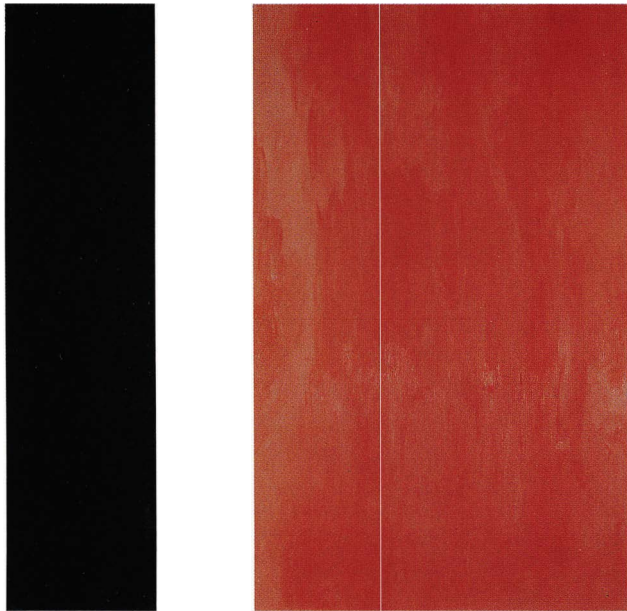
Paint is itself inherently sensual. It is wet, slithery and smooth. It is tactile. Paint has a corporeal presence. It can mark up a surface as makeup or a tattoo mark the skin. It can bring into the world an image of the body. But it is also a complex siphon for the imagination. Paint permits an image-world that is representational, but also unreal, and the painter has to grapple with what the brushmarks will visually construct and how the painting will be read.

Historically, in painting, figuration has functioned as the means to render flesh. During the past decade Totino has worked through various modes of figuration. In the mid-1980s, she placed full figures upon an expressionist all-over ground; the representation of the body was conflicted with the pure corporeality of the paint surrounding it. Later work juxtaposed closeups of women's faces, often staring straight at the viewer, with decorative panels and text which again functioned to undo the authority of any one element. In this exhibition, Totino transcribes the body not as figuration but as macroscopic planes of flesh.

And she ventures beyond the flesh to the inside of the body with images of the digestive tract and the retina. One painting carries the statement *I penetrate you* suggesting at once the eroticism of sexual intercourse, the

penetration of the psyche, the painter's transformation of the blank canvas, and a blunt reversal of the viewer's gaze at the artwork. Who is penetrating who's space? Totino poses the corporeal qualities of paint as both literal and subliminal, as something more loaded than the formal qualities of paint and surface or the literary potential of presenting a descriptive narrative.

Totino achieves a disruption of the descriptive by, again, denying the unity of the image and thus its narrative potential. In her earlier work, any story that might situate the activity of the figure was destabilized by the brushstrokes that abstracted the background. During the late 1980s, her sectioning off of the canvas allowed the figure, decorative patterns and text to each make their own claims within the space of an image. In the current exhibition, each painting stands as a unified structure, but in combination the paintings function as an installation — a fragmentation

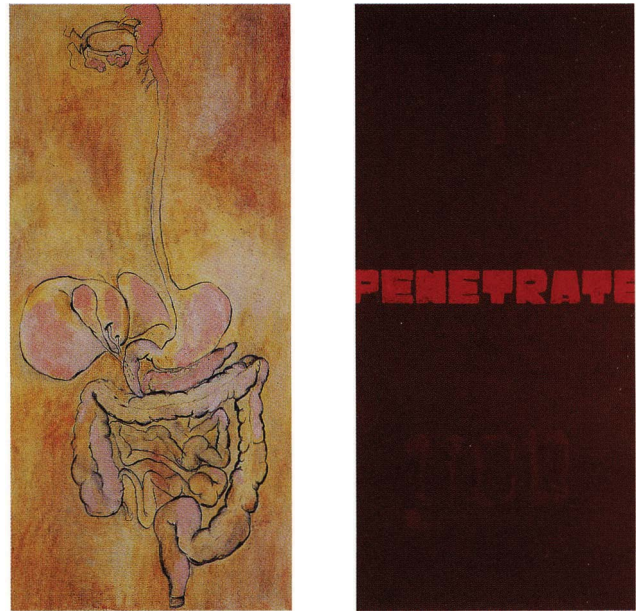


of earlier paintings into a larger visual statement. This statement tends to read like an extended phrase. All the paintings are of equal height but different widths, they have different subject matter — tattoos, floral decoration, text, body innards, colour and surface — and are unevenly spaced to create an armature of assertions and pauses. The phrase they present, however, is not linear; it neither starts nor ends.

In this visual form of languaging, Totino has been influenced by a number of poet/artists in Vancouver, among them Gerald Creede, Kevin Davies, Deanna Ferguson, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Judy Radul, Lisa Robertson and Nancy Shaw (several of whose writing has served as textual elements in Totino's paintings). These writers complicate the linearity of language by combining words and phrases to twist and dislodge meaning; to make them subjective and, in a way, sensual. Not only is the semantic potential of the words emphasized, but also their physicality, their "objectness"; they take on corporeality as well as meaning. Steve McCaffery noted that the Language poets, with whom these Vancouver writers have affiliations, make poetry that is more "an experience in language than a representation by [language]."¹ The definitions we normally ascribe to the words are still there, but they are put into question and the words take on a matrix of new dimensions. Although Totino's paintings are

representations, they are also about the experience of language within the physicality of paint. The florals, for example, are beautiful, sensual images of flowers. But placed in proximity to the other paintings, a new construct of associations comes to bear on them: they lose their independence, and the clarity of representation and meaning is thrown into flux, an aspect integral to the potency of poetry.

Within this context, sensuality is aligned with the poetic. Sensuality, although traditionally associated with the carnal, with the erotic, can, like poetry or paint, engage simultaneously both the carnal and the intellectual. George Bataille considered poetry as erotic in its ability to create a fusion out of separate entities. In viewing Totino's paintings, both the explicit and the unexplicit come into play and activate a volatile territory of sensuality, where the safety of the rational lies in the same bed with the desire for the irrational.



Sensuality turned into eroticism has been much critiqued within the realm of painting, often by critics who have interpreted the paintbrush as an heroic extension of the penis gaining orgasmic power over the canvas. This has metaphorical implications for society at large. Totino, however, turns this eroticism into another range of possibilities from her perspective. And I stress possibilities. For this is not an equation with heroicism. Rather, it is a dislodging of power into a realm of doubt and an exploration of female desires and sensuality. It is a doubt that provides for the inconsistencies that comprise the world and the means to mediate one's place in that world. It is a recognition "that the power of an image [is] not separable from the politics and sexuality of its producer," nor, in fact, of its viewer.² **KEITH WALLACE**

¹ Steve McCaffery, *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986*, (New York/Toronto: Roof Books/Nightwood Editions, 1986), as quoted in Alan Davies, "Steve/steve", *Writing 25*, (Vancouver: Kootenay School of Writing, 1990), 55.

² From Totino's notes for illustrated artist talk at the Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1993.

All paintings are oil on canvas. Dimensions are 243.8cm in height and range from 60.9 to 193cm in width.