



Jennifer Pazienza wants to return talk of beauty to contemporary art and takes pleasure in playing with questions of how differing notions of beauty, goodness and truth function in her research and art. PHOTO: JAMES WEST/THE DAILY GLEANER

Beguiled by beauty

Jennifer Pazienza once felt she couldn't make legitimate art if she mentioned beauty, that she couldn't be politically correct and mention pleasure. Tired of boycotting talk of beauty, she's says it's socially imperative things change and she wants to lead that charge. Story by Mike Landry

Let me be honest, I don't think Jennifer Pazienza's paintings are beautiful. But, to be fair, beautiful is an adjective I'm fairly certain I've never used to appreciatively describe an artwork.

Pazienza accepts my opinion of her work — she wants to make beautiful images, but she knows its an attribute that viewers may dismiss in her paintings. But the Fredericton-based artist and professor of art education at UNB cannot stand to see me eradicate beauty from my art vocabulary.

"I think it's a myth," Pazienza says. "I just can't imagine that you can't look at a work and use the word beautiful. Culture has conditioned you not to look that way, and I think it's a crime. The thing that keeps you coming back is that contract between you and that image, and that's the perception of beauty."

Pazienza's right. Postmodernism has instilled in me a deep cynicism towards such subjective ideas as beauty. I'm part of what Pazienza considers a dangerous trend, one formed by a male, modernist aesthetic.

Survey a hundred contemporary artists' statements about their work, and rarely will you find the word beauty. When you do find someone speaking of their work in terms of beauty, there tends to be a correlation between their low position on an the contemporary art hierarchy. Beauty has become a dirty word, a scarlet letter on any artist seriously embracing it.

This is the way it's been for decades, and it's something Pazienza wants to address in



Jennifer Pazienza's oil on canvas painting 'Bramosia' (2009).

her research and her painting before it's too late.

She wants her work to "force the issue" of beauty. Her touring series, *Landscape - Love & Longing*, being exhibited at the Saint John Arts Centre until May 4, is a collection of large-scale oil paintings of landscapes. In making the work, "landscape is place of refuge" where she can experience beautiful phenomena without preconceptions. Her impulse, ever since abandoning flat, hard-edged paintings in the '70s, is to recreate that.

"I know they're going to be called landscapes in the tritest sense," she says. "That's the risk I'm willing to take. To be criticized for making work that is indirect — that relies on the beautiful to bring the viewer back to look again and again."

"I want to make beautiful images; not easy images. I'm not talking about easy images but things that will engage the viewer."

For Pazienza, risk is a kind of symbol of beauty: "what we're really uncomfortable with is all the uncertainty conversation around beauty raises" While she had long come to terms with the risk she was taking against post-critical cutthroats with beauty in her art practice, it's only been recently that she's started incorporating the beautiful into her academic research.

"I'm trying to articulate how it is my paintings look as they do and, with them, propose the personal and social value for returning talk of beauty to academic conversations and contexts"

Jennifer Pazienza's 'Early Spring.' Her recent work, 'Il Suro' appears on this week's cover.

Pazienza explains the change by referencing a paper she wrote in the 1980s that studied how children can analyze artwork just as intelligently as art historians.

"Grade 5 kids here in Oromocto were arguing about Degas' use of women, but we never once talked about whether those images were beautiful. The thing about beauty didn't come up," she says. "I never talked up the complaints against beauty, but I did by omission."

She's currently working on a paper addressing beauty, and how her artwork addresses the University of New Brunswick faculty of education's deep regard for social justice. A handful of theorists inspired her to take up her charge academically — principally Harvard University's Elaine Scarry and American art and cultural critic Dave Hickey.

Already attune to the fact her artwork was being silenced academically because of its roots in beauty, Pazienza picked up Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* in 2001. In that book, which also inspired Zadie Smith's novel *On Beauty*, Pazienza found her own story and intellectual grounding for her research.

Herménégilde Chiasson, with his unabashed advocacy of beauty in a cynical age, was also inspirational. Pazienza considers the former lieutenant governor a kindred spirit.

"Is there a way to return the conversation to questions around beauty without negating the work of feminist thought or anything like that?" she asks. "It ought to be possible to speak of beauty in a way that is neither mystifying nor defensively provisional."

Pazienza believes these historically loaded and problematic definitions of beauty can be avoided by taking up culture theorist Janet Wolff's idea of a principled position. Rather than simply a universal idea of beauty, principled positions are informed by personal, social, cultural and historical influences in particular situations, such as the classroom or an art gallery, through dialogue, negotiation and debate.

"I'm interested in beauty in all its manifestations — the good the bad and the ugly. I don't want to prescribe. Including beauty in is linked to democracy," she says. "It's possible, endless possibility. There isn't a single right way, and that's scary for a lot of folks. As an educator and artist I want to know what is possible."

"I don't want to talk about what beauty is or isn't, but how it functions. Beauty does

have a part to play."

For Pazienza, the part beauty plays can be found in the metaphysical response one has, and many continue to seek, in art. By shutting the door on talk of beauty, Pazienza believes an artist undermines their work. Not only is beauty what she says keeps us looking, but it opens all the other dimensions an artist is seeking to address with its unlimited possibilities.

This is where social justice enters Pazienza's reasoning, and why she says we shouldn't wait another second before re-inserting talk of beauty into contemporary art. Without beauty, Pazienza sees a world that's abandoned possibility and has been left with a truly ugly world of inadequate housing, poisoned environments, empty foods, alienating art and a growing list of atrocities and injustices.

"For Elaine Scarry, and for me, beauty compels what she calls replication, a begetting, what I call re-creation — the means by which we can renew our search for truth and our concern for justice."

Pazienza keeps a list of quotes on her computer of comments gallery-goers have made upon seeing her work. She's interested in the way people respond, and it impacts her practice. They may not make her do something in particular, but the temptation is there.

"I want to know why they have meaning in them. That's the educator in me."

"After you do all the deconstructing, what keeps (art) coming back as a source of knowledge is that it is a beautiful object. As

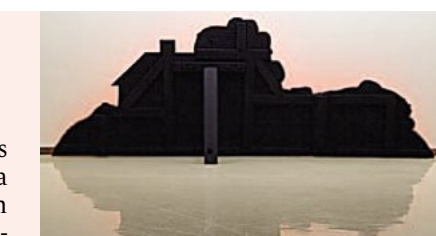


Jennifer Pazienza oil on canvas painting, 'Biancospini' (2009).

difficult as it may be, you want to keep looking it. Folks need to pay attention to their own rhetoric, to their own underlying assumptions. Yes, the beautiful is difficult, but we have to have it. We have to have them because it's a social imperative. We have a particular need at this historical moment to pay attention."S

Mike Landry is the *Telegraph-Journal's* arts and culture editor. He can be reached at landry.michael@telegraphjournal.com.

Jennifer Pazienza exhibits 'Landscape - Love & Longing' until May 4 at the Saint John Arts Centre. Twenty per cent of sales from the show are being donated to the Saint John Regional Hospital Foundation's campaign, 'The Give 2012' for the New Brunswick Heart Centre.



Erik Edson's 2006 'Sunset.' PHOTO: OWENS ART GALLERY, PURCHASED WITH FUNDS FROM THE RUTH LOCKHART EISENHAUER ART FUND

Erik Edson

Beauty in art has been presented to me as many things: a weapon; a truism; a tool; a Eurocentric bias; a cop-out; a hot potato; an absolute; a mystery; seductive and manipulative. And I tend to agree. For me, it is an unverifiable fact, something that is always present.

Most of my work is concerned with the natural world and how we perceive and represent it. 'Nature' is often identified as a site of beauty or even the evolutionary source of what we understand as beautiful. Forced to contend with it, my usual method is to attempt to ignore it.

Sunset, a work of mine from a few years ago, is about a natural phenomenon and our associations with it. Modelled on a stage set, *Sunset* is fabricated with plywood cut into a silhouette representing a house and tree. The surface facing the viewer is painted black, while the reverse is painted with orange and pink fluorescent spray paint (the kind often used in construction and roadwork). The sculpture is placed against a gallery wall leaning slightly away from vertical to catch the gallery lights. The orange and pink colour reflects onto the white gallery wall creating a kind of glow.

The effect of *Sunset* roughly mimics the physical reflection of light creating actual sunsets. I think the associations for the viewer are more complicated than the simple materials used to make the work or the clichéd beauty attached to conventional pictures of sunsets. I think it enrolls the viewer as the purveyor of beauty.S

Erik Edson is a printmaker and installation artist, and an associate professor in the fine arts department at Mount Allison University in Sackville. In 2011, he was received second prize in the Open Studio National Printmaking Awards.

Beautiful dreamers

Following Jennifer Pazienza's call for a return to a talk of beauty, Salon asked six contemporary New Brunswick artists to discuss the role of beauty in their practice.

Jaret Belliveau

I first started taking photographs as an attempt to capture the beauty I saw in nature. I would wake early in the morning, before the sun had risen, and drive into the country. I found this process meditative and exciting, never really knowing what I would find. It was in this same manner I started photographing my family for my body of work *Dominion Street*.

It began innocently enough, when I headed out with my father one autumn morning in an attempt to start his 1951 ford. In the midst of his repairs, I heard a loud bang, and turned to see him enveloped by thick white smoke. My pursuit of photographing beauty in the seemingly ordinary or mundane moments of my own life started there. Capturing this eerie, dream-like image excited me and sparked a serious interest in defining my own subjective beauty.

Taken in a parking lot in front of a drug building, *Frenchy's* is a perfect example of finding beauty in something ordinary. My mother had walked out of the thrift store with a bag of clothes, and I asked her to show me what she had bought. As we looked through the clothes, my mother pulled out and modeled a bright red piece of fabric she had found. It was at this moment, I first took a photograph on a feeling and not as an exercise in composition.

What I didn't know then was I would also be challenged to find beauty in my mother's battle with cancer, and her eventual death. As I worked through this familial experience, capturing moments of my family's story, I could not look away. I felt that I needed to find peace and beauty within this tragedy.S

Jaret Belliveau is a photographer and documentary filmmaker originally from Moncton. His exhibition 'Dominion Street' opens April 26 at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery.



'Frenchy's' from Jaret Belliveau's 'Dominion Street.'

Alexandra Flood

Ah, beauty in art, where to begin. It's been kicked to the curb so many times by po-mo and po-po-mo that, trust me, it'll come full circle with a terrifying vengeance within the next few years. What goes around comes around. Thick gold frames are already this season's elite choice of presentation for the British contemporary art star Damien Hirst. He knows the jet-setting rich will eat up his gold-framed paintings in a nanosecond to fill their mansion walls worldwide. And that's a great thing.

The last 30 years have dictated that if an artist wanted respect from their peers, beautiful pictures in gold leaf frames were, well, a terribly embarrassing faux pas, cagey waters to be avoided if they ever expected to score a hot contemporary dealer or, dare I say, get bought by an edgy art museum. Stark, white-sided canvases with soulless compositions and brushwork have reigned supreme and brainwashed all of us. It's so sad how constipated international art tastemakers have gone along with this. It's just like hard core music collectors who project their single-minded, lofty-driven taste in music. They preach intellectual merit as the sincere primary goal in new music rather than groove-appeal. But, in the meantime, they're all just dying to turn home and mainline Dr. Dre full blast on their Bose systems until they're brain pleasure centres are ill.

The world is, after all, ending this November, if anyone's been paying attention to the Mayan calendar and escalating solar flares. I just hope we have enough brains left to go out in style. Godspeed.S

Alexandra Flood is a Saint John-born painter and four-time semifinalist for the Sobey Art Award. She has been visiting London, England, for the past six months.



Alexandra Flood's 'Angel Dove.'

Maggie Estey

The meaning of beauty has broadened, partly because some art has given us the time and space in which to explore what is beautiful about more things. I avoid the word 'beautiful' when talking about art to keep from being misunderstood too badly, because some people hold on to beautiful as a word to describe what should be taken wholesale and, like, aspired to.

Writing and art, in the western tradition, can be read as having been about aspiration, historically. I find Northrop Frye's theory of modes really useful when I try to talk to people about this, because it shows the trajectory of narrative. Frye noticed that the earliest writings were about uncompromisingly perfect mythic heroes that people were supposed to aspire to be like. The beauty in these tellings was a thing to be strived for, as a personal aesthetic, spiritual or intellectual standard. As time passed, Frye's mythic hero gave rise to lesser, ironic heroes — hapless figures that people actually identified with. It just so happens, a lot of canonical visual works were commissioned by patrons who meant to use them to become closer to God, like iconographic portraits or sculpture to aid in meditation and prayer, for example. In a way similar to how narrative changed, visual art moved away from aspiring to emulate great beauty, and more towards capturing aesthetic emotion and touching what was already in people.

A big, old blood clot splatted against a brick wall — in its animation, wet sound, line and spectrum of reds and browns and black — is beautiful. What's not beautiful about it? I'd say nothing. One might say, "A scene of bloodshed likely coming from violence is not beautiful!" I disagree. That it might stem from violence is sad or upsetting, but sad and upsetting can be beautiful through a contemplative lense. One might reply, "You think it's good to be sad and upsetting? That is weird. You are gross." This is why I don't say 'beautiful'.

Anyway, a lot of my own work is an attempt to slow down the ugly and the scary, so the beauty in it can be seen, and sometimes to slow down the beautiful and catch it in its ugly and scary moments, too. I think it helps me to relax enough about surface aesthetics to be able to notice things that might be more useful to me.S

Maggie Estey is a Miramichi-born, Fredericton-based emerging artist whose work is on display in 'I saw my reflection come right off your face,' a group show at Culture & Language Connections Montreal.



Maggie Estey's ink on paper 'smashing my son's reputation' from her 2011 exhibition 'Monster Costume.'

Jared Peters

I make paintings that grapple with problematic historical narratives, and nothing is burdened with so problematic a history as the traditional notion of 'beauty.' The idea that 'beauty' is an unassailable sensibility that transcends the corruption of messy politics and banal social life has been repeatedly and thoroughly compromised. Survey art through the ages, and you will find a catalogue of beautiful images corralled into the service of political power. From Caravaggio to Jacques-Louis David to Leni Riefenstahl, 'beauty' is directly implicated in the often sordid and violent political and social life of the society defining it. And this isn't even beginning to critique western art history's problematic preoccupation with the female figure. It is no small wonder that avant-garde art movements of the 20th century, from Dada to Conceptual Art, utterly rejected the notion of 'beauty' and traditional aesthetic sensibilities as being irretrievably corrupt. It's a hostility continuing to shadow the dialogue of contemporary art.

Which isn't to say that 'beauty' must and should be utterly dismissed and banished from the discourse of visual art. In contemporary 'ideas'-based work, 'beauty' can be a wonderful means of negotiation. People like to look at attractive things, and making something 'beautiful' can be an effective way of starting a conversation, permitting greater access to the conceptual concerns of the work.

In my own practice, I often strive to render the historical subjects I choose to paint with an ambivalent seduction. In other words, my paintings try to let 'beauty' retain its sordid historical burden, and to permit it to operate under an interrogative glare of suspicion. Painting, an inherently aesthetic medium, permits me to explore history at its most problematic and morally dubious, while retaining all the glamour and seduction of warplanes, dictators or whatever it is I paint. For me, 'beauty' has no moral authority. 'Beauty' is a visual device that is uplifting, awe-inspiring, seductive, and above all lethally dangerous. But, then, so is art.S



Jared Peter's 2011 painting, '26 Spitfires.'

Jared Peters is a painter from Saint John and was a finalist in the 2011 RBC Canadian Painting Competition. He is the recipient of the 2012 Sheila Hugh Mackay Foundation scholarship and begins graduate studies at the University of Western Ontario in September.

Marie Hélène Allain

Besides 'The Ugly Truth About Beauty' there is also 'The Beautiful Truth About Beauty,' but the thesis is impossible to solve since beauty is subjective.

When I was a child, beauty was attached to pleasure, to pretty things. I still remember a beautiful two-tone car, in turquoise and white, I often had the chance to admire in my village. Turquoise and rose-fuchsia were my favourite colours — what they coloured, was automatically beautiful to me. With time, colour became a tool to make an object more representative. It now has the function to describe the reality of things and life. Today, when all elements fit in the right place to express and describe something — when they can have an impact — they become good tools to communicate. And how gratifying that is!

But the authenticity of what one has to say is another step. We are in a period of crisis, everything has to be solved immediately. We don't take time to consider who we are. 'Our own mission' sounds archaic. Time is lacking to search the false note. Maybe this has a link with the 'Ugly Truth about Beauty.'

The artist, as anybody else, needs to be attentive to the truth they perceive, and to choose their own way to interpret their vision. "Everything is beautiful in its own way" may be true, nevertheless, everybody may not like the other's way of being and doing. Nowadays, the notion one has of beauty may be different, and everybody has to live with it.

To me, beauty corresponds to authenticity. Beauty is true when all the elements 'fit the puzzle' in order to reach something of the essential. Coincidentally, two different friends of mine recently quoted to me the following assertion by Proust: "True beauty is so individual, so novel always, that one does not recognize it as beauty." One of them told me, to her, this can be applied to spiritual life as much as to beauty. Beauty and authenticity are twin sisters and they are both undoubtedly related to the spiritual world.S



Marie Hélène Allain's 1999 installation 'Apprendre.'

Marie Hélène Allain has an artistic career spanning more than 40 years. A sculptor, teacher and nun, she received the Strathbutler Award in 1996, and was honoured with a retrospective exhibition and tribute gala in 2011 by the Beaverbrook Art Gallery.

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