

# Stereotypes on the lam

HENRY LEHMANN  
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

**F**ugitive, the succinct title of a current exhibition, precisely and elegantly captures the multi-layered essence of a series of Lorraine Simms's paintings at Maison de la culture Marie-Uguay. In the works, the fast-rising Montreal talent records the faces of fugitives. The large portraits are also decidedly fugitive in that they cannot be neatly pinned down as to function and impact.

The images transform our own stereotypes into fugitive concepts. One of the things that makes Simms's random cast of fugitives special is their gender, female.

We know our image expecta-

tations for outlaw men; they are almost supposed to look mean, ugly, dumb or some combination thereof in their mug shots. On the other, hand, how many mug shots of women can most recall? Indeed, those by Simms seem to emerge directly from the mists of our minds, surprisingly full-grown and ripe. And the true crime, if there is one, possibly as much to do with the artist as it does with the subjects, is that they come across as – well – tender and sweet and, at times, as dewy and wide-eyed as next year's prom queen. The woman in Fugitive 11 – none is identified by name – looks positively spellbound, the grey patch in each giant brown iris assuming monumental emotional

proportion.

Simms obviously relishes her splendid paint and pigment, which she has piled up to suggest the formal anatomical structure of the faces and, conversely, to give the faces the delicate translucence of transience and youth. In Fugitive 13, the slightly upturned face has what might be called an inner glow, as the medium warm planes of the face engulf the red-hot rims of the eyes and the lower angle of the unquestionably noble nose.

That such a picture is partly an ongoing process – at least in the imagination – is expressed in the filigree of paint drips marking the lower edge of the work. This, of course, is also an exquisite indication that paint, like flesh itself, is as fugitive as that psycho-visual transaction of looking at art and re-forming it over and over in our mind's eye. Indeed, for all their magical realism and fire, Simms's images are actually an acute form of personal interpretation on the part of the artist – and of trust on the part of the viewer. Simms explains that she found these faces on websites printed them out and then enlarged them.

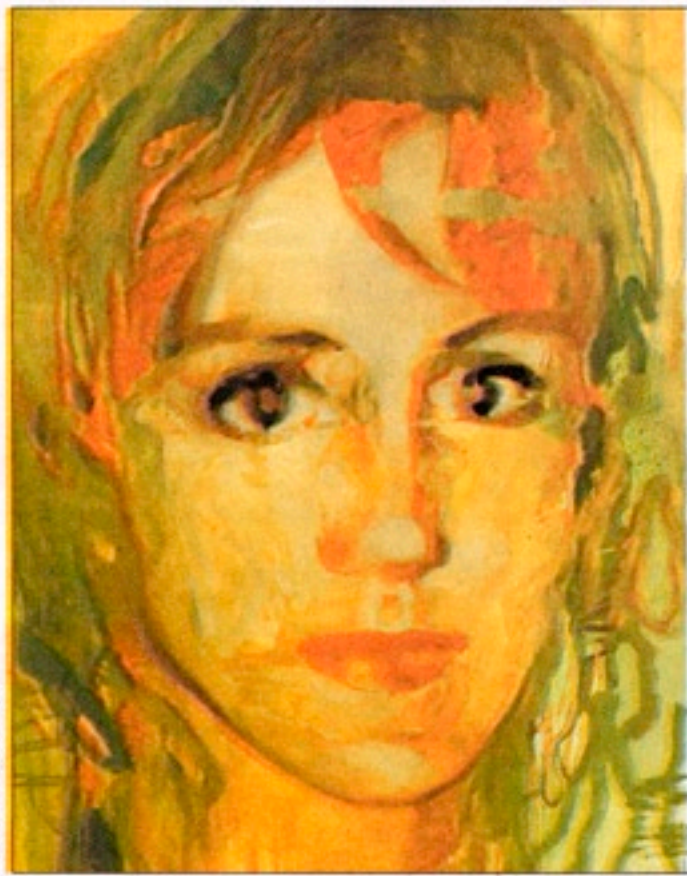
"So one question is what was my real relationship with my sitter?" asks the artist. Certainly, a hefty percentage of that "relationship" went into her sheer delight in tone and sensual brushwork. And, as for the issue of trust, we somehow want to believe that, in this implosion of visual fireworks, it is more or less the actual faces that are passed along to us in each canvas. Yet, would it be altogether a major disappointment – a breach of faith – if we overheard the artist whispering that she made much of it up, and some

of these women were based on someone else? In fact, Simms has openly fessed up that some of the outlaws' faces are slightly made over in her own image: "As I blew up the computer images, they lost their clarity. I'd sometimes refer to my own face in a mirror to get it right."

Of course, Simms could have also simply included the photo-images along side the paintings, so viewers could get their own sense of just how objective the artist may have been – or what changes were necessary to transform mug shots into high-fallutin' portraiture. This methodical approach might be appropriated if Simms were more concerned with highlighting the conceptual aspect of her portraits. After all, it could be argued that the portraits are an update – art weds idea, psychology weds documentary – touched on in the early '70s, but given new life here through the seemingly archaic technique known as painting.

Certainly, by bringing her own self and her bad-girl subjects together in some of the works, the artist does make a statement that is at least 99 per cent conceptual. Suggested by Simms's residual presence in some of the faces is the notion that none of us stands alone, islands unto ourselves. We are all implicated, through morality and custom, in the crimes of other people, even when we are far from being overtly victimized; in other words, we are you, and you are us. Our total inter-relatedness may be the most earth-shaking discovery of all time.

Indeed, inter-relatedness in Simms's work abruptly ends at the surface level for her subjects, as they float up from the



LORRAINE SIMMS  
Fugitive 9  
from  
Lorraine  
Simms's  
Fugitive  
series.



nebulous depths of the Internet on the artist's chosen crystal ball: the home computer. Simms does not know any of these people personally and doesn't think she would want to "if given a chance."

That's fine, but shouldn't the person depicted be informed of her inclusion in something as public as fine art? If the women subjects are society's victims, has Simms made them into our victims also? What makes these images radically different from other portraits is that they are not sought-after prizes, smug symbols of success. Presumably still on the run, these fugitives could even get caught based on identification provided by a painting, the lat-

est innovation in crime-stoppers.

However, it's just as likely that what Simms' oils do best is to alert the interested public to the power of the laying on of paint, a ritual gesture at least as sacred as saying sorry or telling the whole truth. Don't pass up this enthralling show, both steeped in tradition and avariciously modernist; it is a fugitive, low-tech statement in an era of high-tech, plug-in-the-wall super art.

**Lorraine Simms's Fugitive** remains on view at the Maison de la culture Marie-Uguay, 6052 Monk Blvd., until April 15 (closed Easter Sunday). Call 514-872-2044.