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Stephen Douglas

An Elusive
Provocateur Whose
Time Will Come
review by Grady Harp



Procession

“The big artist keeps an eye on nature and steals her tools.” *Thomas Eakins*

EACH of us has encountered an artist whose impact is immediate, producing one of those moments when suddenly all previous responses are altered permanently – where those reactions to visual stimuli originate concurrently in the eye, the mind, the psyche, and the perception of the world immutably change. Stephen Douglas is such an artist. Less concerned with fame and transient ranking in the arena of contemporary artists, Douglas is a painter who has never painted for anyone but himself, being less concerned with trends or zones of the constantly changing schools of popular art than he is capturing the essence, the ultimate nature of something. Not that Stephen Douglas is hermitic: his pupils are many, artists who have been profoundly influenced by his sheer technical prowess as well as his unique manner in approaching his

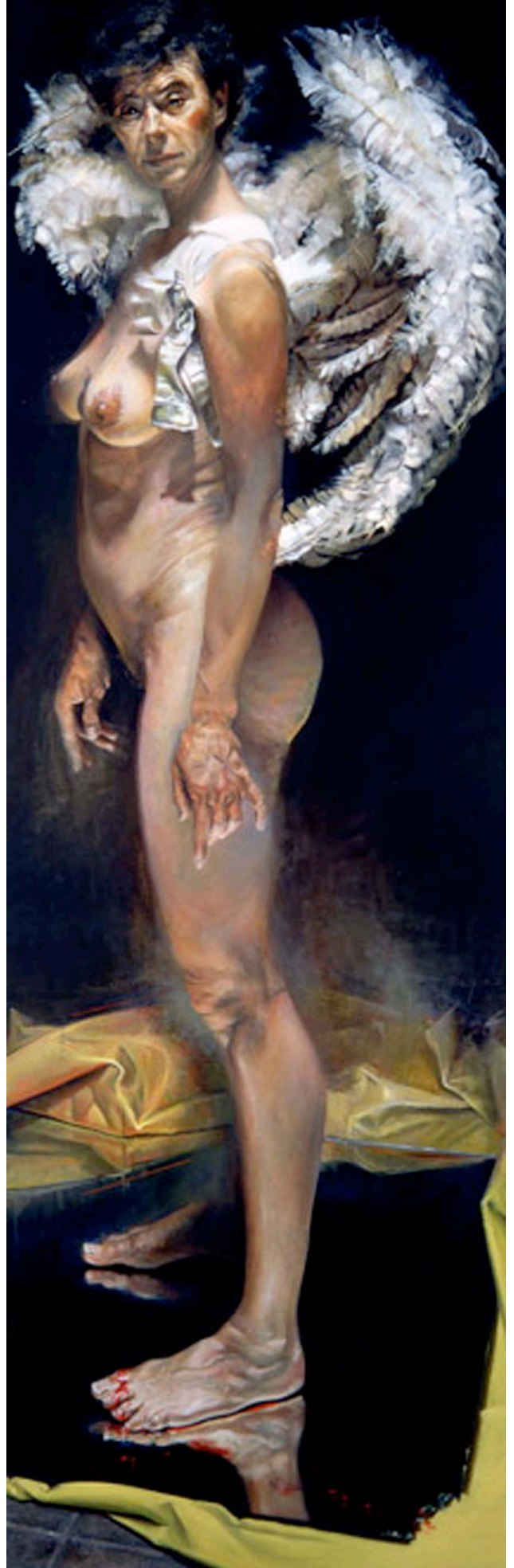
subjects; he is regularly sought after by famous individuals who commission him to produce portraits they realize will depict the true essence of their characters; he is in museum collections.

What makes Stephen Douglas an artist whose work will live far beyond his time is the utter honesty of his painting. From the beginning of his career he has been a figurative artist, even in a time when representational art and especially painting the figure was not considered ‘important’ –the era of the 1970s. Feeling inadequately prepared from his formal training to express what he chose to paint, he studied the paintings of Thomas Eakins, finding there a methodical technique to which he could relate in his investigation of the figure. Other artists making a strong influence on him were Alberto Giacometti from whom he gained the sense of the existential equality of form and

space, his teacher RB Kitaj whose statement 'Books have pictures, and pictures have books' has remained Douglas' leading light as he explores the core of each of his paintings, and the great Spanish master of observation Antonio López García, so highly regarded among artists as the painter whose ability to actually **see** both the object is equaled only by his ability to investigate the essence of that object.

So how does Stephen Douglas use these intellectual foundations of existentialism and polished perceptive skills to produce the arresting, fascinating paintings he has consistently produced over the years? One has only to stand before one of his works to understand his ability to make every aspect of his art reflect truth, to discover his imagination that at times dares to push beauty aside for

right
For my Father





meaning, to sense the progress of his journey as an artist. In Douglas' words *'the figure is the arena in which I am most comfortable. Whether they are outdoors or in the studio, painted from life or from photographs, my goal has always been to imbue my subject with an atmosphere that transcends their objectivity and occupies a space that only painting can generate: a world where looking and touching are synonymous. The artist acts as a middleman between the fact of paint and the idea of painting. I listen to the paint as much as I listen to the will to control it.'*

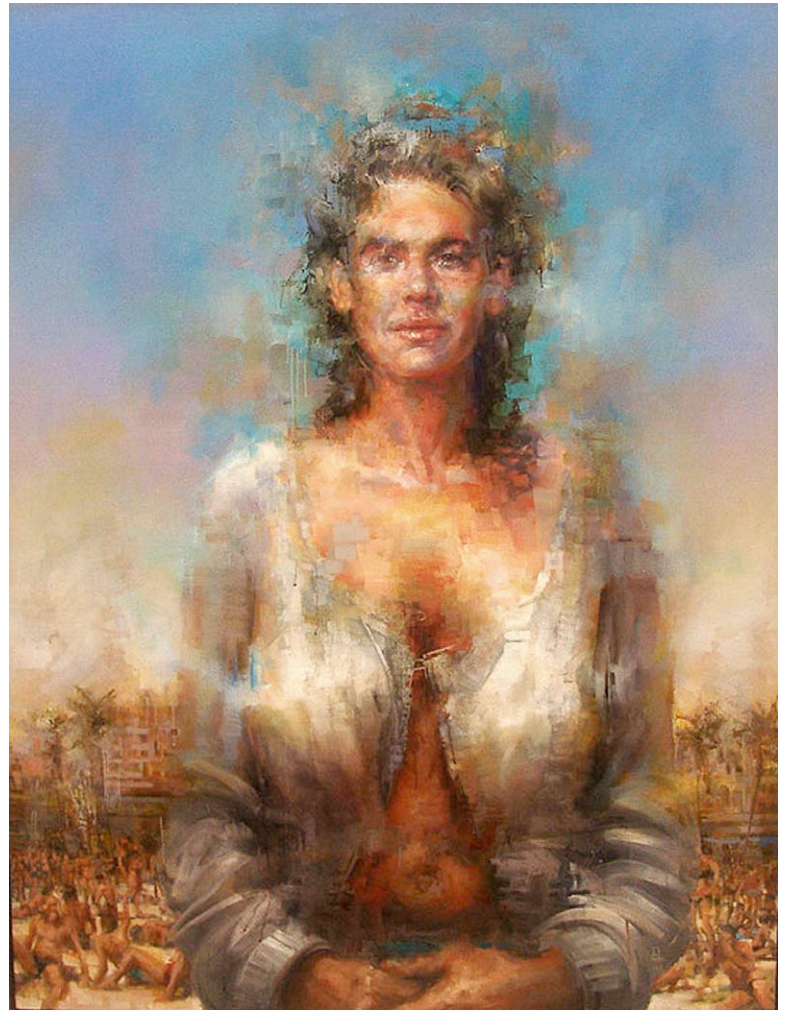
In his studio paintings he places his model with masking taped markings on the floor left obviously visible, sets his accessory chairs and other used paraphernalia, lights his subject, and then allows his response to the idea to begin to direct his painting. In ***For my Father*** he

left
***The Artist Advances
Toward Middle Age***



has, in response to his father's stroke and subsequent death and his having been raised as an agnostic, created an angel – a nude female with obviously handcrafted wings, standing on a broken mirror, her feet bleeding, but her gaze is somehow comforting. In a painting of the same scale **The Artist Advances Toward Middle Age** Douglas requires the same honesty and courage of presentation in one of his many self-portraits. Or he combines all of these techniques in a more narrative work **Shadow** in which he paints a model in a costume of the model's design and creates a somewhat ominous atmosphere as his tape marked figure stands in a circle of blood.

Douglas paints his models in the studio setting where the light is of his own design – artificial or indirect – 'in the tradition of Chiaroscuro where illumination defined rather than obscured.' But the 'definition' of his subjects can be both hard line (as in his very realistic portraits) and muted line, the edge of the model seemingly blending into the space surrounding, as though air or atmosphere is visible making the edge or focus ambiguous. Douglas admits to 'an ongoing attempt to discuss a transcendent relationship with what surrounds all of us. The



Ascend

Old Stories



“Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves. at the same time.”

Thomas Merton

ability to do so is a record of how difficult it is to maintain a spiritual embrace of reality’. **Old Stories** is a current example of this conundrum in that the chair, the masking tape markers, even the model’s timer and the hides are distinct whereas the nude female seems to be almost amorphous until in the left portion of the triptych Douglas opens the background animal hide to open the studio view to the ‘reality’ of nature (the reference to sky), and the question of what is real is challenged by the presence of a secondary face or personality emerging from the new question of reality of the model.

Always pushing himself to explore new ways of seeing and responding to the object, Douglas moved outside his studio into the dazzling California sunlight of his Venice home and beach. Because of the brilliance of this quality of light outside of the controlled studio obscures detail rather than enhancing it. He painted a series, *Humidity*, that allowed him to explore this now visible atmosphere that enveloped his models as in **On Guard, Ascend, and Stay**. The figures, always Douglas’s main focus, remain more than realistic semblances: the palpably real models somehow exchange their exact peripheral outlines for a blending with the now visible vapor and near tangible air of the atmosphere. Yet as in his Studio paintings the realism of the grounding elements (here the very exact description of the beach at Venice in the distance) remains, reminding the viewer that no matter how exploratory the artist is with the corporal and psychological essence of the model, he holds onto the truths of his decided settings.

Attending to his art does not

preclude Stephen Douglas from stepping into commentary on the world as he views it at present. His very large canvas allegory **Procession** addresses the chaos and the turbulent times in which we live. He includes elements of the military/war, aging, the committed individuals and those who find little need but to care for pleasure, and other elements of contradiction: and in the midst of this vast parade is a self portrait of the artist dressed in tatters struggling with or being supported by a strap of confinement. And as with all of the paintings of Stephen Douglas there is far more waiting to emerge than a first glance provides. His art continues to challenge, to question, and to inspire artists and public alike who recognize the power his paintings represent.

Shadow

