

With Broek, it's all about the paint

GALLERY GOING
GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Hans Broek at Artcore Gallery
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55 Mill St., Toronto; 416-920-3820

Talk about being way off. I'm walking the periphery of the big white cave that is Artcore Gallery in Toronto with painter Hans Broek, whose lushly worked oil paintings on linen make up Fiction to Fiction, the first exhibition in Canada for this New York-based Dutch painter. Some of Broek's paintings are portraits, but most of them, the most ambitious of them anyhow, are paintings of interiors, usually with attendant groups of figures.

We stop in front of what strikes me as a particularly winning one—a brown, cream and brick-red genre painting that strikes me as decidedly warm and therefore inviting. I admire it. "Where do you think this is from?" Broek asks me—for he invariably bases his paintings either on previous paintings, or on photographs or film stills. We



Hans Broek's *Medea* is based on an image from Pasolini's 1969 film starring Maria Callas.

stand gazing for a moment upon this apparently cozy portrayal of a woman bathing a small boy in a cistern. "Oh, I don't know," I tell him, "Vuillard?" Broek laughs. "It's from Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1969 film, *Medea*," he tells me gleefully. The woman is Maria Callas. "This is the scene where she's bathing her children just before she murders them!"

Vuillard indeed. Broek is a difficult painter to categorize, for the simple reason that he works in areas that are now essentially forsaken by advanced artists—interiors and portraits. Furthermore, his portraits are of subjects pretty well covered the first time: heads after Velasquez and Goya ("I wanted to see how they managed to get some humanity out of paint"), imaginary portraits of *Hamlet's* Ophelia and of Natasha Rostova from *War and Peace*, close-up portraits of actors from Stanley Kubrick's film *Spartacus*, and tense group moments from Kubrick's big-budget, soft-core film orgy, *Eyes Wide Shut* (clearly Kubrick is a rich resource for Broek).

I suppose you could argue, therefore, that the artist's selective sojourn within history is some kind of retreat from the concerns of contemporary painting. In the long run, however, that would be a difficult argument to make, mostly because of Broek's superlative, deft but authoritative paint-handling—which is still a valid concern to painters. He can be very brushy and approximate. He often limits his palette to a couple of colours—to the point where his big "finished" paintings still look like sketches. And he paints his figurative paintings so abstractly that if you get close to them, the figurative elements dissolve into a welter of rapid, frenetic brushstrokes that become, at a certain intimate distance, the real stuff of the painting itself. At this stage of postmodernist history, this may well be a matter of painting's cunning critique of itself. But whether Broek's paintings are guileless or informed (I'd go with the latter), paint is what they're about.

Look at *Medea*. The fragrance of Pasolini's film—and of Callas's magnetic, feral performance—is still there. But so are a hundred passages of "pure" painting. That vertical margin of feathery pigment running up and down the right side of *Medea*, for example, is premium Clyfford Still, the brawling American "action-painter" whose slag-heap paintings of the forties and fifties were so murderously forceful. The allusion to Still may not be deliberate. But it's a portion of Broek's inheritance, and he has vigorously taken what he needs of it. Which is the kind of thing that happens everywhere in his work.