

SHAUN DOWNEY

A Voyeur's View

The impact the pandemic has had on many artists' work continues to reveal itself. It is as if a certain distance needed to open up between the immediacy of the experience and the art created during it for artists to be able step back from the canvas and the effects come into focus.

Canadian artist Shaun Downey is no exception. Known for his interior scenes—often featuring a woman alone in an apartment unaware she is being “watched”—the pandemic, as it did for many of us, drove him outdoors to explore his neighborhood in a way he hadn't before. His discoveries inform a lot of the new paintings in his upcoming show at Arcadia Contemporary, *Night Shift*.

This most recent work contains many of Downey's signature elements—painted frames that heighten the sense of voyeurism, women who gaze off into some inscrutable interior or exterior world, open-ended narratives—but takes them even further. Heavily influenced by film noir, pulp comics and graphic novels, the air of secrecy and narrative aspects are amplified. Adding to the effect, *Night Shift* is a series of nocturnes.

“I wanted a cohesive look for this show



1m1



- 1
Manhattan Hotel Room, oil on panel, 24 x 24"
- 2
Investigator II, oil on panel, 22½ x 48"
- 3
Along the Water's Edge, oil on panel, 6 x 6"
- 4
Into the Blue II, oil on panel, 5 x 5"
- 5
Blue Gradient, oil on panel, 4 x 4"
- 6
Window Watcher, oil on panel, 24 x 24"

2



3



4



5

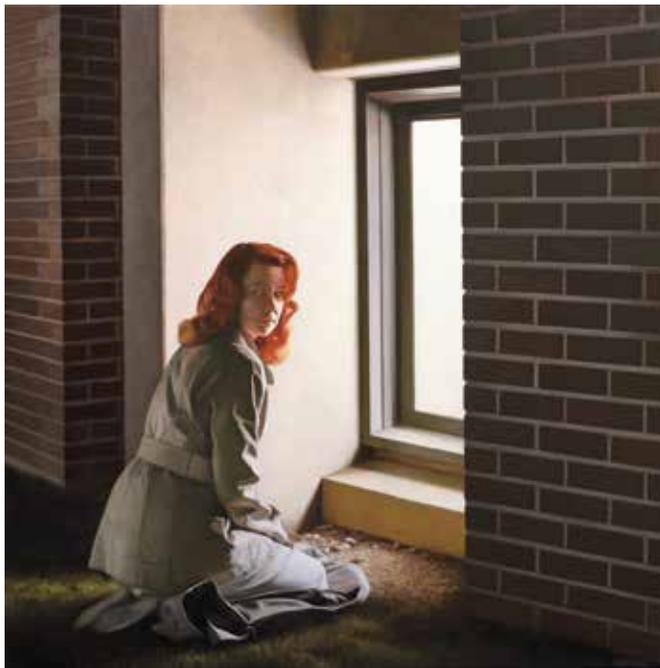
and the night scenes add another layer of mystery and intrigue,” says Downey. “Painting the frames into the work adds to the fly on the wall idea,” he says. “It’s heavily based on film—that same feeling you get—as if you’re peering into someone else’s life and living through that character. In that way you become a part of the story, part of the work, rather than just standing before it, staring at it.”

Downey and his wife, Kelly Grace—an artist, model and vintage hairstylist who has appeared in many of her husband’s paintings—spent a lot of time wandering the University of Toronto campus.

“We started hanging at this one spot where there was a ground-level window that had light beaming out of it 24 hours a day and thought it would be a great setting for a painting,” Downey says. After an extensive photoshoot and months of whitening the hundreds of images down to “the one,” he made *Window Watcher*, in which a woman kneels on the ground before the window, looking over her shoulder surreptitiously.

“We were discovering [our surroundings] in a deeper way and we became closer with each other because we were spending all of our time together,” he shares. “My wife featured in even more of my paintings, which added another level of connection. If I’m painting a piece that I’m more personally connected to, that closeness shows in the work. Even though you can’t put your finger on it, it’s somehow legible in the work.”

Not all of the paintings are set outside but all of them pose questions. *The Investigator II* depicts a woman in a trench coat in an architecturally complex stairwell. Is she a spy? What is she thinking about so intently? In *Manhattan Hotel Room*, a woman in a vintage frock stands before a



6

mirror, her back toward us, looking downward as if preparing to go out? Simply washing her hands? Taking a much-needed moment to herself?

“I like to tell a story without smashing people over the head with it,” Downey explains. “That’s why my titles are vague. I like to [paint scenes] that can have multiple outcomes. I want [viewers] to wonder what brought them to this moment and what’s going to happen after this. I love exploring the middle of the story because it’s open-ended on both sides.”

Downey’s work often depicts solitary situations, something he has had to consider in the wake of the pandemic.

“I was aware that people might want a different essence in my work,” he says. “[But it was also] all the walking we did, venturing out more than staying in my studio, and finding all these cool locations...I wanted to express that sense of adventure.” ●

Arcadia Gallery 421 W. Broadway • New York, NY • (646) 861-3941 • www.arcadiacontemporary.com