

Fake promises and hidden chords

Chris Aerfeldt's compelling paintings strike a hidden chord - what you see is what you *don't* get.

Her paintings home in on the fake promises, the yearning, the anxious wait, the hidden desires and the surface rituals of daily life – it's all there.

Aerfeldt's deftly handled paintings are tableaux of a type of underlying self-talk – a pictorial spill-out of everyday issues and earnest longings. She seems to sense or know that nobody in fact maps out their lives, carries out decisions or achieves aims innocently, independently, or without external influences. It is as though the female subjects of Aerfeldt's paintings resist all this and brace themselves against external impositions.

The contemporary woman is besieged. Has there ever been a time when women were so bombarded and so harried by self-help promises, so harassed by well-meaning mantras? Add to these factors such things as contemporary negativism, economic uncertainties and supply shortages and life paints a depressing scenario. However, Aerfeldt's paintings show women who are engaged upon a type of fight back. These are the modern-day heroes. Thankfully, Aerfeldt is able to knowingly wink her way through group-think depression, social expectations and superficial roles to promote a healthy whimsy through her ironic paintings.

There is a Cindy Sherman-like knowingness about Aerfeldt's women; they may seem to be posed in roles but they are not caught by them. Aerfeldt's women are not subservient; the subtle toned paintings are not oppressive in atmosphere and their subjects, always depicted with painterly flair, seem stoically resolute.

Also, Aerfeldt's images and characters are almost iconic. In her paintings we see the vaguely recognizable forms of art history's female figures together with their hopeful gestures: the upturned eyes of saints, the skyward gazes of true believers, the devout poses of Assumptions and Immaculate Conceptions, the lamentations of sinners and the offerings of the redeemed.

The effects of Aerfeldt's constant visits to the aesthetically bracing art treasures of the Prado in Madrid, the National Gallery in London and the Louvre in Paris all show through. The attitudinal attributes of El Greco (1541-1614), Murillo (1618-1682), Zurbarán (1598-1664) and Caravaggio (1671-1610) steal through her work. She has subsumed their visual impacts and transfigured their effects in the process of

analysing her own reactions to the doleful history of women's experiences as depicted in Western art. In Aerfeldt, the historical forms and formats are slightly familiar but her disconcerting contemporary contexts are not. For example, Baroque grandeur is made to fit with fashion magazine poses; clouds collude with consumer products and landscapes and lagoons intrude into lounge rooms.

In Aerfeldt's paintings, we no longer see the saints and sinners of old. We see everyday women caught in everyday psychodramas. Here in her paintings we find broken romances, wistful dreams and contemporary uncertainties. However, there is no victimhood and no special pleading. Aerfeldt's women arm themselves with what they have and remain determined and defiant.

Aerfeldt's paintings are compelling and the most compelling thing about them is that they are about women and of women – but, not just for women. Take in the full visual force and metaphoric emblems piled up in just three of her most recent paintings: "Are you tired of living with feelings of suffering, helplessness and being overwhelmed?" of 2011; "She stopped giving dinner parties, because she couldn't bear the anxiety about getting everything ready on time" of 2011 and "Place around yourself a semi-permeable Golden Bubble of Protection" of 2012.

Stand back and ask yourself: "are these not wryly observed depictions of the self-empowering defence mechanisms of the modern woman?"

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