

VISUAL ART

The future is Angela Grossmann

Acclaimed painter has first solo show locally in seven years

BY JOHN MACKIE

VANCOUVER SUN

Angela Grossmann prepared for an interview with *The Vancouver Sun* by writing some notes on her iPhone. But when she scans them, she looks at me, looks back at the phone, and smiles.

"Mmm...., mmm ... no, that was a heavy quote in case you were one of these heavy art guys," she says. "I'd put you on the 'not really' side."

She scans some more ("Um, ... no ... no ... no ... hmm, no, I don't think so") until she finally finds something she likes.

"You didn't ask me how do you know when you're done," she states.

How do you know when your paintings are done?

"That's funny you should ask," she replies. "There isn't really a set answer to that. Why did I give you that question? Just skip that one, no one cares about that."

There have been numerous stories written about Grossmann, who's been hailed as one of Vancouver's best painters since the mid-'80s. But none of them prepare you for her engaging personality and wit.

Grossmann is meeting the press because she's just launched her first local solo show in seven years. It's called *The Future is Female*, and includes both paintings and collages.

The title was inspired by a button she used to wear when she was a student at Emily Carr back in the early '80s.

"At that time it didn't feel like [the future was female]," says Grossmann, 55, now a part-time instructor at Emily Carr. "It was a provocative thing to wear it."

It's still provocative, so she decided it would work for a



Artist Angela Grossman stands before her collage, *The Future is Female*, at the Winsor Gallery. Behind her: her work, *Ancient Girl*.

IAN LINDSAY/PNG

show featuring only images of females. Some of the paintings are small, improvised works she rips off in half an hour, using a single tube of paint. The collages, on the other hand, can take eons.

"The thing about the collages, although they look slapdash, maybe, or casual, they're much more difficult than actually using paint," she says.

"Another thing I like to do, for some reason, is give myself a handicap. If I can make it more difficult for myself to extract the image, or extract meaning from the image, I will do that. I like to struggle with the thing, to find it, so I know when I'm

doing it that it has ... strength. These are difficult. They're exhausting, in fact."

The most striking collage bears the title of the exhibition. It features black and white images blown up, cut out and reassembled into a piece that has so much movement it feels like it might leap off the canvas.

"She's made up of hundreds of different images, so it's not really clear really who she is," says Grossmann. "But she is somebody of a certain age, [and] really coming into contact with who she is, or trying to find her identity. So she's trying on lots of different kinds of

clothes or looks or images, and finding an identity that fits.

"That's why it's shattered and going in and out of focus, with lots of different parts to it. There's parts where it looks like she's being held back, or pushed forward, and it's all of those awkward things about becoming a woman."

Look closely and you'll see it on an unusual canvas — an old awning.

"I've always used materials that have had another use before," says Grossmann. "I like it for its colour, I like the seams on it, I like the rivets at the top. It already had a character to it when I found it."

Her unusual canvases have been one of the hallmarks of her career. She scours flea markets and antique stores looking for stuff to paint on. In the past she's made art from suitcases and a couch cover; this time out, two paintings were done on old player piano rolls.

This all sounds rather Bohemian, and in fact, she comes from solid Bohemian stock. She was born in London, where her mom painted the walls with "dramatic" murals and antiwar posters.

"Now that you bring it up, funnily enough, [it's] not so distant from the kind of work this looks like," she notes.

The family moved to Toronto, then Grossman came west to study at Emily Carr.

She shot to local fame as part of a *Young Romantics* show in 1985 at the Vancouver Art Gallery with fellow students Attila Lukacs, Graham Gillmore and Derek Root.

"I think we all got Canada Council Grants the year of our graduation," she says.

"So with that money, we all left. I went to Paris for a year, Attila went to Berlin, Graham went to New York and Derek went to London. I was basically gone about 10 years. Then I came back, via Montreal, [where I] did a master's degree."

A good example of her current painting style is *Blue Sheets*, a beautiful blur of a sensual female wrapped in blue. Look closely, and there's also a ghostly outline of another body.

"That's because it was another painting, a completely different character that I didn't like," she says.

"But I liked certain bits or a colour on it ... you can see that the drips go [in another direction], because it was that way. Then I turned it around and found something else."

"I find things in the paintings. I don't go on with a preconceived idea of what to do, I just find things. I allow myself to imagine things, or see things."

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At a glance

**ANGELA GROSSMAN:
THE FUTURE IS FEMALE**

Where: Winsor Gallery,
3025 Granville

When: to May 6

Info: www.winsorgallery.com

Paper dolls on parade

VIEWFINDER | Angela Grossmann's paintings explore essence of girlhood

ANGELA GROSSMANN
Paper Dolls
Diane Farris Gallery
1590 W. 7th Avenue
Until June 24

BY CLINT BURNHAM

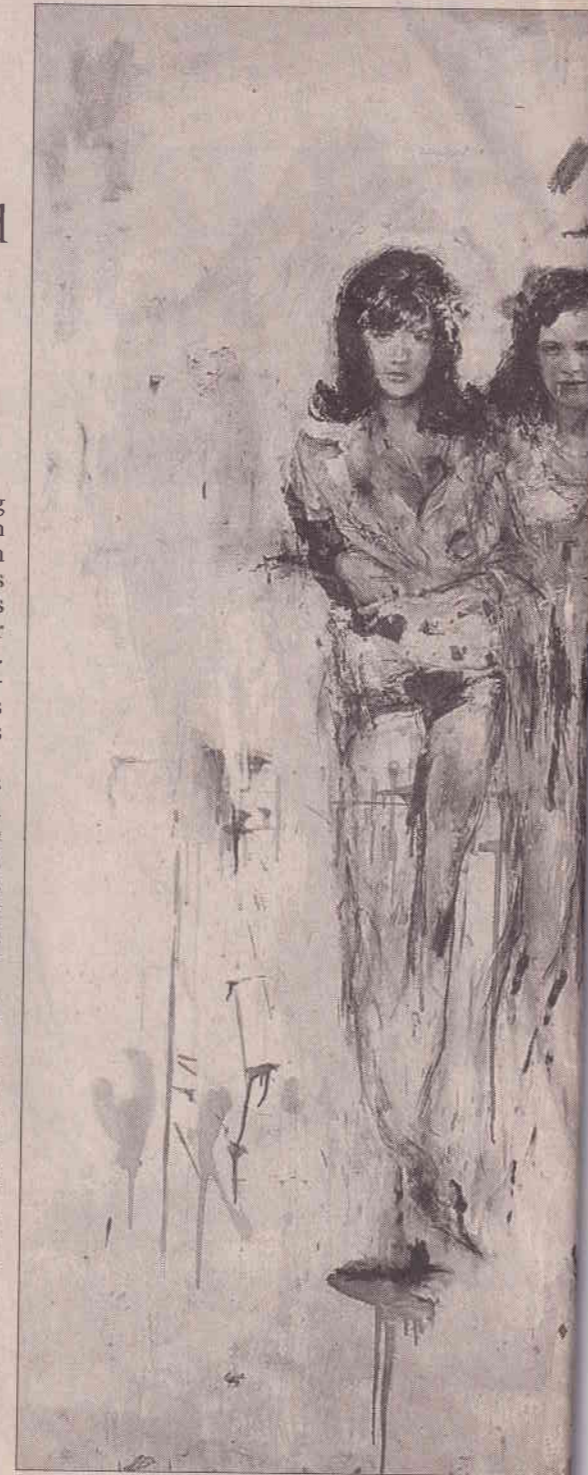
Angela Grossmann makes big pictures — in this case, in her glorious new exhibition now up at Diane Farris Gallery, pictures of girls. Paper Dolls are works on paper, some life- (or Amazon-) sized, and others smaller. Working from Victorian-era photographs of girls, Grossmann has made art that shows us who girls were, and are.

When you look at Grossmann's paintings, at, say, *Pearls* (2006) when you enter the gallery, you probably have to look up. The painting (it's actually a collage, or mixed-media on paper) is that big: over seven feet high. You may see the pearls of the title on the girl on the right (there are two girls in the picture). And you will see the girls' faces, which both stand out and do not stand out from the rest of the work.

Grossmann has taken small portraits of girls in the 19th century and blown them up, but that is not the only reason the faces rest uneasily in the paintings. For she frames the faces very carefully — which is not to say neatly — in a swirling mess of hair and dark paint. The girls themselves hold a steady gaze, and their upper bodies are fairly discernable: pearls, bodices, arms folded or crossed.

But as your eye moves down the painting, things start changing. The brush strokes become more vigorous, more deliberate, less representational. The girls' legs almost disappear in the surface of the paper, to be replaced or finished with drips that continue to the very bottom of the paper, collecting there in a horizontal line, as if unwilling to leave the scene.

So there are a couple of things going on in Grossmann's paintings in this show. First of all, there is a tension between the use of found, or appropriated, images of the girls, and Grossmann's rendering of their surroundings, of their bodies and clothing. Then, there is a tension between the working up that she does around the girls' heads, as a concentration or vortex of activity, and the verticality with which the paintings move down the surface of the paper. And finally, there is a wonderful messiness on the paper itself, as a record of Grossmann's materials and process: drips, splatters, and smears lend the art a cheerful



Angela Grossmann — 'Pearls,' 2006, collage, oil on paper, 86 x 45 inches.

insouciance.

In other paintings by Grossmann in Paper Dolls, such as *Blue Girl* (2005), layers of collage are evident on the surface. Here the girl's face is slightly cocked, her eyes defiant, her arms crossed, and her body lightly draped in fabric conveyed through lines akin to a fashion designer's sketches or the New York painter David Salle's outlines. In the companion painting, *Blue Girls*, the surface around the girls' heads is cracked, as a record of Grossmann's concentrated and fervent activity with the brush and other implements. In contrast, the bottom half of these girls is rendered with broad brush strokes, in which one can see the physicality of the artist's effort.

Speaking with town studio-edges the distinction between what she does with the girls' heads and bodies. "The heads are the real persons, I don't make a hat up," she declared, referring to the use of vintage photographs. And when her imagination does take over, on the surface, there we see splashes, the smears of Grossmann noted that it's not for that effect, "but that it looks like. I mean that's me trying really hard. But when the painting is in the studio, it's not a commodity; I don't want the con-



Angela Grossmann — 'Fur collar.'



'Are you cross?', another work of Angela Grossmann.

ketplace to enter into the studio."

The messiness of Grossmann's paintings may well deter some viewers and attract others. For these stains are a record of her working at her art, and part of the vocabulary of painting since the mid-twentieth century. Grossmann's own history allows her to partake of that tradition. Born in the U.K., she arrived in Vancouver in the late 1970s and attended Emily Carr, where her colleagues were Derek Root, Graham Gillmore, Attila Richard Lukacs, Mina Totino, and Charles Rea. This group then showed as the Young Romantics at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1985, re-establishing painting as a medium worthy of consideration after 20 years of conceptualism and minimalism.

In Grossmann's paintings, then, the process of making the work is as relevant as any meaning that might attach itself to the images themselves. Thus *La Senza Girl* and *La Senza Girl II* are in part motivated by the marketing of sexually explicit clothing at so-called



'La Senza Girl I,' 2006, oil and mixed media on paper, 40 x 30 inches.

"twens," or girls between the ages of nine and 13. But the paintings themselves resist any easy or moralistic outrage at what the kids are wearing today. *La Senza Girl* (2006), for example, shows a girl in pigtails wearing a revealing bustier. Her stomach is exposed, and one leg may be naked as well. But the juxtaposition of vintage photograph and tarty get-up is what gives the picture its real dynamism.

As in most of the photographs that Grossmann uses, the girl's eyes in *La Senza Girl* possess a seriousness that is hard to find in contemporary pictures. It is a seriousness that was only possible in a world before photography became ubiquitous, a seriousness borne of a time when having your picture taken was a serious, if not ceremonial, occasion. Grossmann weds that seriousness, that long-gone past, to a present day that, like her half-determined, half-messy paintings, resists easy definition. For in the end, these are paintings that ask us to do something. They ask us to think about what we expect pictures to look like.

Clint Burnham is a Vancouver educator and freelance writer.