

## Great art is hard to find By Tony Martins

Call me old fashioned or call me greedy but I much prefer art that gives me everything that art possibly can. I'm not one to get caught up in the current and fashionable definitions that seek to truncate or restrict what art should be or how an artist should create it. Rather, I simply want the stuff to hit me with everything it's got.

What has art got? By my accounting, it has only three ways to engage with me or any other viewer. It can affect us with ideas, with emotion, and with technique. That's it. Simple, right? Why overcomplicate or reduce it? On rare occasions, when I see new works that simultaneously convince and beguile in all three of those possible ways, I feel that I'm looking at great art.

The upcoming solo show by local boy Anthony Tremmaglia at the Ottawa Art Gallery is called, fittingly, Hard to Find, because for me it checks each of my three "great art" boxes. It includes seven large and medium-sized mixed media abstractions that appeal to the brain, the heart, and the naked eye.

At once strange and beautiful, the Hard to Find series presents mysterious amalgams of the human form and formations of rocks. It's a rather simple concept and yet it confounds to just the right degree. With these works, the viewer's brain naturally strives to identify what appear to be body parts rendered in charcoal—parts that are seamlessly intertwined with rough and jagged rock painted in acrylic and, occasionally, watercolour. This is traditional stuff folks — no computers, no replicated images from other media, no obedient art history references — but the minimal aesthetic is squarely contemporary. Because there's something for everyone, I predict that the showing OAG will draw a large and diverse crowd.

While a great many observers of contemporary art go to great lengths to downplay or even dismiss the importance of rendering ability and technical skill, Tremmaglia has literally gone to great lengths to remind us how central those elements can be. The seven painstaking works in Hard To Find took the artist more than four years to create.

Depending on how far away you're standing, you may be shocked to learn that everything has been done by hand. Step very close and you clearly can see the pixilation, so to speak. You can see the brushwork and fingerings; you can understand something of how the media were applied. Take a few steps back so that you lose most of that detail and you might wrongly surmise — as many early observers of the work have done — that you are looking at digital collage. (After all, who in this day and age, would take the time to create this stuff by hand?) Take several more steps back and you likely won't have any idea what the hell you are looking at. This pleasurable mind-fuckery is one of the ways how great art draws you in.

Intellectually, the series challenges by straddling the line between the objective and the abstract. You're reasonably sure that you're looking at the human form entangled with rock formations atop flat, coloured plains, but that's all you really know. These two raw materials that we typically view as extremes — one is vulnerable and organic, the other is hard and inanimate — are here happily twirling in vertical and horizontal arrangements that seem both perfectly reasonable and patently absurd.

Because the works in Hard to Find arguably give everything that art can give, there's no shortage of adjectives we might use to describe them. For me, each of the seven is by turns cubist, totemic, alien, ephemeral, austere, confrontational, epic, sensual, etc. As such, you can enjoy them when applying either a macro or micro view. You can marvel at how they were done or ignore that aspect entirely and imagine yourself in some extraterrestrial place that's revealed to be, when you look close, made up of the stuff of earth.

For these reasons I'm confident that whatever are the delights you may personally encounter in Tremmaglia's rare exhibition, those things will be easy to find.