

Connect with your inner tyke

Two shows ask us to revert to childhood and see with fresh eyes

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VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

Childlike qualities of innocence and naivety are most always found in the past tense. Getting back to them – and getting them back – is very much part of two tempting exhibitions in town right now.

- "Distanz," by Grit Schwerdtfeger, at Corkin Gallery. In this suite of medium-size colour photos by the enormously talented emerging German photographer, scenes of perpetual summers are filled with listless play, days of endless leisure and benign landscapes shown at a distance.

Far-off figures stand silently in a placid body of water in *Seebad* (2004). Idle vacationers are shown seated outdoors in a modest resort area in *Promenade* (2004), with little evidence of action on anyone's part. Time stands still, as does everything else – including the artist's ego. Unlike Andreas Gursky and others among the photographer's more dramatically inclined contemporaries, Schwerdtfeger seems disinterested in artfulness itself. None of her deadpan photos might ever be described as "painterly."

Clever, this. We're being asked to look at them as if we're in the process of seeing for the very first time.

- "The Promise of Solitude," by Ed Pien at The Koffler Gallery.

If it were possible to ignore the fact you're in a sizeable gallery space showing one of the country's most sought-after artists, you might otherwise imagine you've wandered into the bedroom of a precocious child who's fixed on walls intimate drawings of innermost secrets, dreams, fears and fantasies.

Pien's drawings, luscious and devious at once, are a riot of seductive mischief. Grotesque doll like figures exhibit all manner of delinquent behaviour. In *The Puppet Player* (2003), figures laughing maniacally thrust their hands into body crevices generally visited only by family physicians. In *The Red Spider* (2005) a creepy crawly thing with a wolf's head looks even more terrifying having a blood red snout.

But with Pien there's an element of guileless play-acting in his mayhem. "These creatures represent for me a place that's not familiar to us," he says. "To go here you have to shed

all your notions of what's right and wrong. You are entering a realm where to them, everything *is* normal and you're not. It's a very humbling experience."

Fallen Girl at a Masked Ball (2005) shows a pretty little ballerina plunked down on her bottom. It has the kind of rascally playfulness you might otherwise expect from a Gerald Scarfe ink drawing for Pink Floyd. Unlike Scarfe, Pien is not angry. As most of his drawings begin as improvisations on paper, Pien appears not to fear what might be revealed about his unconsciousness.

(Note: I may be alone in this interpretation. Most other critics react to Pien's imagery with gravity worthy of a CSI autopsy report. "A gallery of horrors," went one harrowing review some time back, "bodies malformed and contorted, consuming their own limbs or sprouting new ones uncontrollably.")

The Promise of Solitude, the Toronto artist's cut-paper walk-in installation, envelops a separate gallery space with leaflike shadows and a quiet play of subdued, rich colour. Entering into the work is rather like walking into a space illuminated by sunlight strained through stained glass windows. It helps explain why Pien's depictions of horror and loss bring with them some measure of hope and salvation, with all the attendant religiosity that inevitably accompany those words.

The artist instantly rejects the suggestion that he is in any way religious, though. He went to Sunday school once when he was growing up in Taiwan, and that was at his mother's insistence.

"I don't want to do it anymore," he told her after his first – and last – time being taught by nuns. "It's boring."

Yet *Promise* is in fact a shroud-like vestment made of glassine paper, suspended from the ceiling. It reflects Pien's interest in Mary Magdalene who, according to one account he read, spent the last 30 years of her life as a hermit in the south of France.

"I think making art is a humbling experience," Pien says. "You have to approach it from a naïve and innocent way. You have to remain open to what you find, like going into a tunnel. It's a lovely world, this exploring. It's about being magical and delightful."

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