

VISUAL ARTS OPINION

At Oakville Galleries, Brenda Draney asks you to complete the picture

The Edmonton-based painter's Summer Nap, filtered through the fog of memory, seems much more loaded than its innocent title suggests.



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You just don't know what's going to move you on any given day in an art museum. That's partly why you go — to test the fluidity of emotion and mood against the stolidness of form. Artworks don't change, for the most part — some do, but that's another story — but what moves you might, depending on the turbulence of your morning or which way the wind might be blowing; a single artwork might soothe or provoke, disturb or comfort, depending on what you bring to it.

Put another way, the best artworks aren't sealed systems, with resolution permanently carved in immutable strokes. They leave room for you to come inside and find your own way. The Edmonton-based painter Brenda Draney, with her spare scenes often painted on raw linen, leaves the door open wider than most.

Three of her paintings on view at Oakville Galleries' summer show *An Assembly of Shapes* make the appeal plain: An unfinished (though they're not) quality pervades, inviting you to complete the picture. Her linen surfaces are often left unprimed, the weave of the fabric exposed. They heighten a sense of incompleteness, of something interrupted or left unresolved. One of these on view in Oakville is the tiny *Summer Nap*, a neutral title for what, to me, is an intensely loaded image.

A figure — man or boy, age indistinct, back turned, black hair, bronze skin — lies curled on his side, his back to the viewer. Draney has his knees tucked up, her brush carving the back of a sharp rib cage with soft, gestural strokes — a painterly feat of technique on its own. It's an image made with such attention and care, you're left on a knife's edge of anxious wonder: Was the picture made from affection, concern, or both? The figure seems almost to seep through the raw linen surface itself — adrift in its rough texture, unstuck; drowning, maybe, or dissolving before your eyes. Draney's brush is doing its best to fix him in place, but the slippage is clear and, suggestively, inevitable.

Draney, a Sobey Art Award finalist in 2016, has said that she paints from memory. Part of what she looks to capture — and does, with riveting aplomb — is that sensation of thought and image eroded by time, from certainty to the soft-edged haze of the partly recalled. Her landscapes have an almost abstract quality: a dense, golden fog storming across the wheat-coloured surface, anchored to reality by spindly black trees, or an eruption of fiery orange beside which a loose cobbling of rectangles forms the side wall and angled roofline of a small house. It's as though the image in her mind is slipping away even as she tries to freeze it in time, loading her pictures with an unstable dynamism; they appear almost to shift before your eyes.

Summer Nap seems an innocuous label for so fluid and troubling an image, but, I think, that's the point. With language, Draney leads you in a direction that seems clear — then, with her brush, dares you to stray from the obvious path. I have some ideas about *Summer Nap* that don't have much to do with repose, but that would be giving too much away. It's beautiful, fragile and laced with dread — or it was for me, that rainy Sunday afternoon; you never know how a piece of art will play on your mood, or your mood on it, and that exchange is part of what keeps me coming back.

The best art leaves room for you to have your own experience, and *Summer Nap* does that with deft, affecting poise. I'm not going to take that away from you. You'll have to see for yourself.

An Assembly of Shapes continues at Oakville Galleries to Sept. 1. For more information see oakvillegalleries.com



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