

VISUAL ART » REVIEW

# Melancholy in a dangerous world



**GARY MICHAEL DAULT**  
GALLERY GOING  
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**SUSANNA HELLER**  
AT OLGA KORPER GALLERY  
\$2,500-\$32,000. Until Oct. 30,  
17 Morrow Ave., Toronto;  
416-538-8220

In the Susanna Heller painting reproduced here – which is titled *Hard Rain* and is part of her new exhibition at Toronto's Olga Korper Gallery – the horizon heaves as if you were watching it from a ship running a high sea. The rain of the title is as frayed as old rope and prickly as barbed wire.

Some of it hangs in the air, drooping like Spanish moss. Some of it crackles through the space of the painting, like black lightning. You can see the Manhattan skyline way over at the far left in the distance – it is more or less the view Heller has of it from her Brooklyn studio – now overhung by fat brown clouds, which look like malevolent cinnamon buns.

This painterly convulsiveness seems to be central to the artist's vision of the world. For Heller – who was born in New York, raised in Montreal, who studied at NSCAD in Halifax, and is now once again living and working in New York – the urban landscape, which is her subject, appears to be a place of unstable beauty, as treacherous as it is romantically vast and seductively unknowable.

As with the 19th-century German painter, Caspar David Friedrich – whose work obviously looks different from Heller's but is tinged by a similar kind of vast melancholy – Heller's paintings are about a kind of aspiring but failed sublimity. You get the feeling that Heller would paint innocent clouds like Constable's and tidy, orderly cities like those of Canaletto – if only those worlds were her worlds.



In Susanna Heller's *Hard Rain*, the New York skyline is a place of unstable beauty, treacherous and yet romantic.

and, in the foreground, in contention – or, I guess, in dialogue – a strange Italianate cluster of buildings and, hovering up above them, a writhing dark cloud so highly articulated it seems like some menacing airborne creature. What kind of conversation is this? Only Heller thinks this way – and paints what she thinks.

**JOHN ABRAMS**  
AT LOOP GALLERY  
\$2,500-\$18,000. Closes  
tomorrow, 1174 Queen St. W.,  
Toronto; 416-516-2581

achieving congruence with a film's luminescent flickering. And there is yet another newness to these pictures: it lies in Abrams's bringing together scenes from various films and melding them into one composite painting – as in the superb *From 'Contempt'*, where the juxtapositions and disruptions making up what Abrams calls a "palette of images" seem both painterly and filmic all at the same time.

**JAKUB DOLEJS**  
AT THE ANGELL GALLERY

*La Nuit américaine* is \$30,000.  
Until Oct. 13, 890 Queen St. W.,  
Toronto; 416-530-0444

Jakub Dolejs's *La Nuit américaine* is an exhibition of glittering fragments, an inspectable conceit in which a corner of a rather starchy, opulently wallpapered gallery room offers a selection of French pre-Revolutionary paintings that Dolejs has cunningly painted himself: paintings by Fragonard (a view of

some good-natured ruins), Chardin (a monkey painter at work), a Watteau and a visionary Hubert Robert view of the Louvre in ruins.

These French masterworks, remastered by Dolejs, appear here only as fragments. What it must be like to paint (or rather repaint) half a Chardin I cannot quite imagine, but Dolejs has done it here. And these painting-fragments are hanging in what appears to be a freestanding closet-shaped room within the gallery with two of the walls removed. So, *La Nuit américaine* is a set of

Her world – our world  
– is a dangerous place.  
For half a dozen years,  
Heller painted the  
crystallization of that  
danger in the horrifying  
dynamism of 9/11 and  
its aftermath, which she  
watched from across  
the river in Brooklyn.

fragments within a fragment, a sort of sampling only of gallery atmosphere and of the art-historical meaning that is dutifully housed in galleries but which remains largely unavailable to us, given our inevitable hastiness in looking, and the seeping away of scholarly memory. This art-historical flicker of Dolejs's stands in the larger gallery like the very image of aesthetic and intellectual retreat – a postmodern dance in which you are first offered history and then made to revel in its spuriousness or irrelevance.