

# Painting with a palette of colour and gender

Haakonson captures the nude male

By MAGHARITA REGHELINI

What could be more appropriate than the brush strokes of sensuality framed within the setting of a martini bar? Like the martini, Edmund Haakonson's nine paintings on display at Lola's on 104 St above Whyte Ave are sexy—unlike the cocktail, however, they may very well leave you both shaken and stirred.

Haakonson's collection of nudes and partially draped figures slips into the viewer's subconscious. This gentle seduction, led by exotic, emotional colours, invokes the desire to reach out and touch the expanse of velvet skin, smooth satins and silky sheets portrayed on the canvas.

Visually enticing, the paintings reveal people engaged in solitary moments—through their eyes, the viewer seems invited to join them in their introspection. It is easy to draw the conclusion that such introspection is a personality trait of the artist, especially given Haakonson's choice of subject: the human physique

Haakonson says he has a very

firm belief that the human creature is capable of incredible things when given the opportunity to come to its full potential, and he sees the beauty of the physical form as the first clear expression of human potential.

Preferring to paint the male form, he admits there are some people who don't like the images.

Our culture tends to be uncomfortable with the sight of the nude male (whereas the nude female is a staple of the visual arts); unfortunately, that discomfort often translates to a very venomous response to

Haakonson's work.

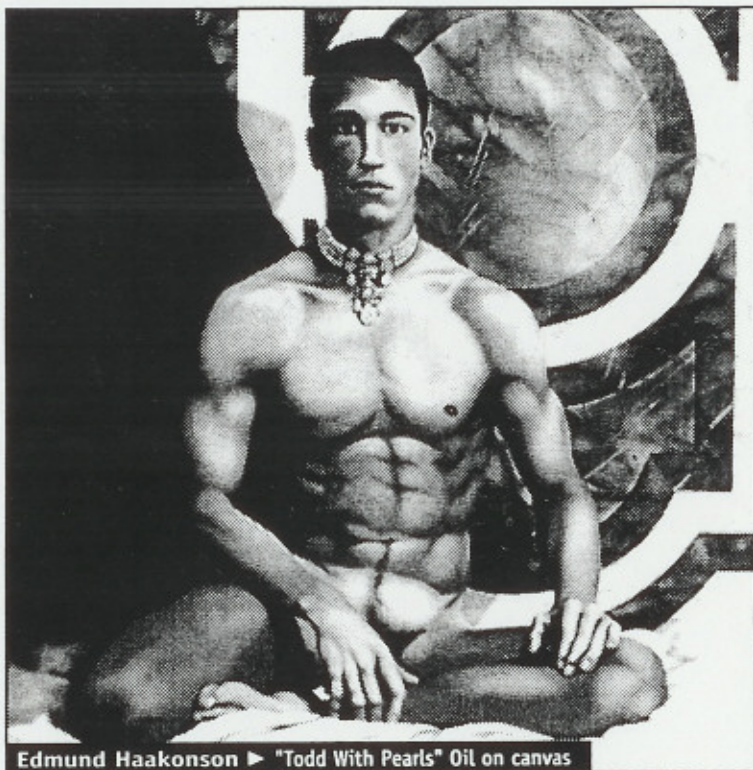
However, as Haakonson points out, Michelangelo nude's were mostly male, no female—and, in his words, Michelangelo is God. Haakonson recalls that his first conscious memory of feeling he was viewing art came to him when he was 11, seeing a photograph of Michelangelo's David. Not unlike this Renaissance master, Haakonson's paintings have often been described as very sculptural, and his use of colour is similar to the original pigments in the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel—blood-red scarlet, emerald green, sapphire blue, and luminous topaz.

Also along the lines of the old masters, Haakonson is drawn to classical symbolism. The painting

"The Letter" may appear a contemporary subject, but look closer and you'll see a rendering of Greek mythology. It is unfortunate that North American audiences are not as educated in classical mythology and religious references as Europeans, because it is this type of content that makes viewing certain Haakonson paintings an enriching experience.

With its tendency to commercialism, modern symbolism does not interest this artist, nor does the spectrum of our modern world. So much of everyday life is so monochromatic, says Haakonson, who tends to use deep, rich colours which evoke luxury, wealth, and grandeur to capture the attention.

One painting that is certainly attention-grabbing is "Todd With Pearls," pictured on this page. Not only do the colours reflect a more luxurious era, the pearl necklace around the subject's neck seeks to remind us of a time when jewels were a unisex celebration of life. Up until the middle of the last century, it was normal for men to be bedecked with pearls, diamonds and other gems. Bewildered by this change of fashion, Haakonson—who admits to having a passion for jewels—turned his disappointment into a concept for a painting. Part of the allure, as he puts it, is that it "freaks people out" to see such opulent



Edmund Haakonson ▶ "Todd With Pearls" Oil on canvas

jewelry on a man. Like a treasure chest of those long-forgotten days, "Todd With Pearls" sparkles as it flashes light and colour with a jewel-like quality.

Another portrait in which Haakonson turns the tables on gender stereotypes is "Grand Odalisque." In this recreation of a famous painting by Ingres, he switches the main figure from a

female to a male, projecting an erotic, softer sensuality than we are used to seeing in a man. One gets the feeling that we are being seduced in a feminine manner.

No mistaking it, this collection is seductive. Not to worry though, should you find yourself longing for a cool, calming drink, you can always order a martini. **V**