



JG HAMPTON: THE CIRCLE & THE ABYSS

NEUTRAL GROUND
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SHELF LIFE Not only are JG Hampton's prints gorgeous to look at, you can touch them too.

James Cameron Meets Jacques Derrida

Hampton's beautiful prints offer up multiple meanings

by Gregory Beatty

The great thing about art is that it's capable of being appreciated on multiple levels. Take this debut solo exhibition by Regina artist JG (John) Hampton. For viewers with a heavy grounding in art history and theory, the show, by virtue of its title, would inspire thoughts of French philosopher Jacques Derrida.

Born in Algeria in 1930, Derrida gained notoriety in the '50s for founding a school of critical theory known as Deconstruction. Working from the premise that many values, beliefs and practices in Western society were the product of social conditioning, he and colleagues like Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Claude Levi-Strauss sought to "deconstruct" the processes by which language, culture and other social forces impacted on people with the goal of promoting a more enlightened and egalitarian society.

In the past 15 years, a backlash has arisen in the scientific community with evolutionary biologists and geneticists in particular arguing that many human behaviours cannot be attributed simply to social conditioning. Rather, they have roots dating back millions of years to a time when we were little more than advanced primates without much in the way of language and culture.

Anyway, Hampton's title is lifted from a 1978 treatise by Derrida called *The Truth in Painting*. That's all I'm going to say about this approach to interpreting his work. If you want to explore this link further, check out the catalogue accompanying this show, which features some great photos, and a pretty dense "text" by University of Regina professor Randall Rogers and Hampton.

The Circle and the Abyss consists of

several hundred exquisitely delicate Giclee prints on paper — 10 of which measure 17 x 23 inches, the rest 6 x 9 inches — along with five light boxes. For fans of post-modernism, the show offers other avenues of interpretation. Anyone possessing a passing familiarity with B-grade Hollywood movies, for instance, would likely be reminded of James Cameron's 1989 sci-fi cheesefest *The Abyss* where, following a collision with an unidentified object, an American submarine sinks to the edge of a deep ocean trough. With a hurricane (read: circle/eye/I) approaching, a Navy SEAL team rushes to the scene, where they encounter a mysterious non-terrestrial intelligence (NTI) and — okay, enough of that.

Included in the suite of small prints — which are arrayed in plexiglass holders on the wall, and which you can sift through while wearing white cotton gloves — are images of a nude, shaved-headed man floating in space; a quartet of spherical, mine-like objects; another grouping of spherical objects that resemble air bubbles; and an image of a recumbent couple swathed in what appear to be bandages. That's more than enough grist for the mill of any po-mo academic out there looking to build a case for interpreting Hampton's show in a cinematic context.

Of mixed-blood Chickasaw heritage, with roots in Canada and the U.S., Hampton is no less diverse in his approach to art-making. Apart from his solo work, he's a member, along with Jason Cawood and Blair Fornwald, of the photo-based Regina art collective Turner Prize. Arguably, this offers another way of interpreting this show.

The Turner Prize, for those who don't know, is named after 19th-century British painter J.M.W. Turner. It was founded in 1984, and is awarded

annually to a distinguished British artist under the age of 50. While it's open to all artists, London's Tate Gallery, which administers the prize, has tended to favour conceptual artists. Past winners include Damien Hirst (who exhibited a shark embalmed in formaldehyde) and Tracey Emin (who offered up an unmade bed).

Like those works, *The Circle & the Abyss* contains a strong conceptual focus. With the light boxes, for instance, the first box (reading right to left) is plugged into an electrical outlet. From there, each succeeding light box is illuminated by power transferred from the preceding box via an electrical cord. The boxes don't function as a true closed loop (for that to happen a cord would have to run from the last box back to the first one) but the alignment is evocative of a circle.

I don't want to get too literal here. But if the light boxes represent the circular component of the show, the small prints that are installed on the wall opposite embody the abyss — at least to the extent that their arrangement, depending on how many viewers elect to don the cotton gloves and sift through them, is in a constant state of flux, and therefore is evocative of "primal chaos" — which is one definition of "abyss" that can be found in the dictionary.

Ultimately, the strength of Hampton's work lies not in any deep/shallow meaning that viewers, depending on their philosophical outlook, might divine. Rather, it lies in the delicate beauty of his ethereal and poetic images. And that's something you don't have to be an art expert to appreciate. **PD**