



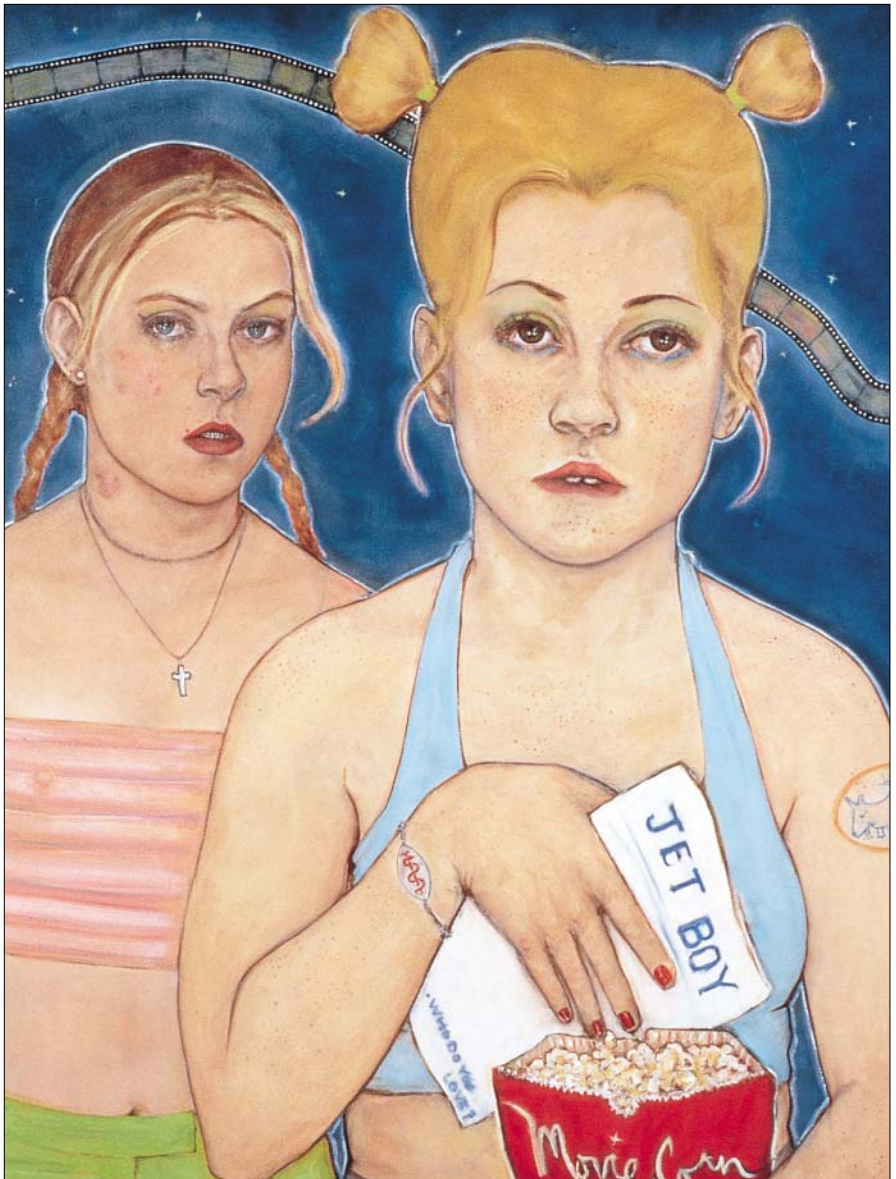
## Lifeworks

## Girl talk

The almost palpable tension in Eliza Griffiths' *Stories of Girls*, her series of oil paintings on view at the Dunlop Art Gallery in Regina until Mar. 28, might be described as a kind of narrative suspense. Indeed, the Ottawa-based artist describes her working method in terms that a novelist or playwright might use. The people in this and other series are characters that she discovers as much as invents. They are "familiar yet alien"—part memory, part revelation, and part projection, perhaps. Working without models, Griffiths builds up layer after layer of paint, adjusting over and over again the angle of an eyebrow, the line of a lip, until the figures somehow become themselves. Griffiths describes them as "characters auditioning to play a part." In *Stories of Girls*, the young women who gaze out from the canvases with heightened self-awareness and inadvertent self-confession are standing on a threshold, experimenting with identity, sexual desire and the personae of femininity. The viewer is uneasily aware that these women are in a transformative period that will have implications for the rest of their lives, and a certain anxiety arises from the fact that, as Griffiths puts it, this is "not a narrative you can fix."

In a number of canvases Griffiths represents two girls together, one apparently tough, the other more sensitive. The "toughie" is only a foil, she explains: "I don't care as much about her." What is more, this toughness is all bravado, and the two figures might be construed as aspects of the same vulnerable character. The icons Griffiths introduces — a crucifix, a tattoo, a medical alert bracelet and so on — have social and personal resonances but are not easy to read, even for the artist, who describes them as "part of the logic of the piece that I don't want to predetermine."

Griffiths admits to anxiety about revealing her characters to the world. She aims for portrayals that are expository but not dehumanizing, challenging enough to bring about a "disruption of



*Ready for Love*, Eliza Griffiths, 1997. Oil on canvas 34" × 42". In the collection of the Regional Municipality of Ottawa–Carleton.

objectification" and tender enough to bring her subjects into recognition as complex *people*. It is hard to look at these paintings without feeling apprehensive on behalf of her subjects or wincing at the memory of awkward phases of one's own life. These characters "don't look resolved," as Griffiths points out, adding that this state of affairs isn't much improved in adulthood

anyway. And perhaps this is the real source of the viewer's anxiety and empathy: knowing that the way we present ourselves to the world at any stage in life is mediated by social norms, confusion about roles and second guesses about the messages we send to others.

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