



Iconoplastic

by Scott Lingley

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Iconoplastic
paintings by Les Paterson
until Sept. 1
at Manifesto
10043-102 St.

Sometimes art deals with immense, unwieldy concepts like love and death and the destiny of the individual in the face of a vast, indifferent universe. Sometimes you get crustaceans, balloons and other buoyant subjects cast adrift on a choppy sea of colour. These days, Les Paterson prefers the fun stuff.

"Right now I'm kind of at war with pretension," says the Edmonton-based artist. "I'm tired of heavy paintings that take themselves very seriously. It just hasn't been turning my crank, so I've gone on a playful tangent. There are all sorts of artists, especially in town, that have a great sense of humor but, generally speaking, people take it pretty seriously. I like to play, have a little fun — not to say the paintings don't have any content. They're just not full of heavy content."

The title of his current exhibit, *Iconoplastic*, is a coinage that plays on the word *iconoclastic*, originally used to describe a movement in the Eastern Orthodox church that sought to banish icons and images from religious worship. Paterson says his intent is not to destroy icons — he'd rather mess around with them.

"I'm into the idea of iconoplastic, which is taking those icons and, rather than destroying them, mutating them and moving them around, playing with them, making them plastic, changing their meanings. It's not the big "I" icons like pop or religious icons like Elvis, or Madonna, or the Madonna. It's the small-i icons, the things that make up the visual language that exists all around us all the time. So you get things like *The Genie* painting. The lamp comes from the dashboard of a car. I always thought it looked like a magic lamp, so I took it and made it into a magic lamp. There are all sorts of icons like that in the show."

Playfulness has often turned up in Paterson's work. For the *Big Sex* show he curated at Manifesto last summer, Paterson constructed a giant 3-D glow-in-the-dark vulva by painting concentric circles on suspended sheets of plastic that shuddered in the draft created by the viewer walking around it. His artistic credentials, however, are no joke — fine arts degree from the University of Alberta and a growing resume; of solo and group shows. He can't help it if his irreverent sense of humour creeps into his work.

"On an intellectual level, I like to take those visual icons and play with them and see what else can be coaxed out of them. On an emotional level, I like planets and sea monsters and snails. I like my organisms without backbones."

There's sea monsters aplenty in Iconoplastic, as well as cephalopods, six-fingered scientists and disposable lighters that dream of being Zippos. Rich colors and textures attract the eye from every canvas, and some of the backdrops for the smaller works look like drop cloths from the studio floor. Consistent with his anti-pretentious esthetic, he doesn't mind if this show appeals to everyone.

"Some subject matters threaten people. People get threatened by art when they don't understand it. There's no link to their world or their mental world, so they're threatened by it and they just immediately reject it. I'm interested in art that is challenging, imaginative, different, but also that people without a degree in fine arts can come in and see and appreciate. I think it's an important thing."

Food is important, too. Though Paterson earns his daily bread washing dishes in a resident care facility ("I'm in it for the groupies," he deadpans), he likes to sell the occasional painting, something this show has already allowed him to do.

"It's nice to sell pictures. It's validating. And painting pictures isn't cheap, so when someone gives you money, it helps cover the cost of everything else. I'm more than happy to get rid of my pictures, I make the goddamn things, I keep making them, I've got a basement full of them, they're much safer on somebody else's wall. If they hang around my place too long, they either get damaged or painted over."

Iconoplastic shows at Manifesto, in conjunction with Allen Ball's 99 Fans, another collection of works priced to move. Ball's show runs until Sept. 10.