

GIRLS WITH GUNS

THE WEIRD, WONDERFUL WORLD OF EDMONTON PAINTER DANA HOLST

BY JILL SAWYER



Dana Holst, *Butterfly Hunting*,
silver point on prepared paper,
2008, 7" X 5".

There's a heartbreaking quality to Dana Holst's girls. She captures them at a precise fleeting moment of independence, when childhood is quickly moving into adolescence. They're proud and sunny, posing with their dance costumes and baby dolls, but Holst often paints an almost imperceptible shadow of uncertainty into their faces — as if they're living the last unburdened moments of their lives.

Their faces are so poignant, that the viewer almost absolves these girls of responsibility for the subdued mayhem going on around them.

In her most recent work, created for *Prey* at Edmonton's Latitude 53 Gallery this summer, Holst takes her girls into a more bizarre, strangely vicious place than she ever has before. But even as they wield knives and rifles, preside at the gravesides of funeral-attired pets, and pirouette around wounded wildlife in their retro outfits, mary janes and elaborate hairstyles, they maintain a joyous connection to the freedom and confidence of pre-adolescence.



OPPOSITE: Artist Dana Holst in her Edmonton studio.
 BELOW: **Dana Holst, *Splits***, silverpoint on prepared paper, 2007, 14" X 10".
 BOTTOM: **Dana Holst, *In the Dark***, oil on linen on panel, 2009, 10" X 8".

"My work has become more difficult over the past couple of years," Holst says. Looking at samples of her drawings and paintings from nine or ten years ago, she has a point. There are consistent themes between then and now — angel-faced girls and babies in old-fashioned costumes, unusual, sometimes anachronistic props, a technique of initially treating her canvases with a wash of cherry red that seeps through the detail of many of her paintings.

Holst's earlier work — begun in 1995 soon after graduating from the University of Waterloo — was intensely concerned with girls and women, and stereotypical acts of femininity and social conformity. Her little girls all played with dolls, and her women, many of them strong, detailed nudes, wielded brooms and vacuum cleaners.

But her previous shows, such as *The Baby Doll Project* (2002) at Toronto's Katherine Mulherin Gallery and Galerie St. Laurent + Hill in Ottawa, and *Dolly* (2003) at Vanderleelie Gallery (now Peter Robertson Gallery) in Edmonton, featured paintings and sketches that were essentially individualized portraits. With *Prey*, she's filling the space around her girls with more detail, and darker contexts.

A few years ago, after she had moved to Edmonton from Toronto, Holst began visiting the Edmonton Humane Society, to photograph dogs and cats up for adoption, as well as abused and injured pets and wildlife. She created a series that became the show *Woebegone* (2006) at Katherine Mulherin. She painted each of the stricken animals on antique ivory piano keys, small, intricate portraits that viewers needed magnifying glasses to see clearly. They were arrayed on the gallery walls against a strip of green mohair grass, like tombstones.

The tiny paintings are wrenching, images of tortured animals with pink sore patches in their fur, missing limbs, soulful eyes. For extra measure, the catalogue for *Woebegone*, which Holst printed herself on her own antique letter press, includes a true story about a dog who lay in a ditch for five days with her dead puppies before she was taken in by the Humane Society. The memorial portrait series is called *Memento*. "I wanted to give them dignity," Holst says. She thinks a bit more and then says, with a smile, "But I also think people who knew my work saw this and said 'She's painting dogs now?'"

The series was accompanied in *Woebegone* by a second set of paintings, fancifully examining violence — two boys with remarkably serene expressions get ready to string up a cat in an old-fashioned noose, a puppy with jaggedly shorn ears sits next to a box cutter, a placid-looking girl in a pink frilly dress is about to be devoured by racing greyhounds.

"I've always been a big animal lover," Holst says. But despite the emotion in the animal paintings, she's not overly sentimental — there's violence, in progress and evident in aftermath, but the subjects, animals and humans, appear to be calm and resigned to their fates.

Holst recalls an odd incident from her childhood that made her think about the vulnerability of animals, and the harm people can cavalierly do to them. When she was very small, she found a wounded bird struggling on the ground. She called over an elderly relative to help her save the bird, but he took one look at it and stomped on it. This story is recounted with an air of slight bemusement, but it had a lasting effect on her.

Beginning the animal paintings was a turning point for Holst, not just in her technique, but also in the narrative and symbolic contexts that she started to bring to her work. She started thinking about more overt displays of humans' dominance over animals. Some research uncovered a whole cache of odd hunting photographs — the classic type in which a man with a gun straddles or poses proudly in front of a large dead animal. That was when Holst decided to combine two artistic passions — baby-faced dancing girls and dead and dying animals. And that led to *Prey*.

Holst lives in a delicate restored bungalow almost literally in the shadow of Edmonton's hulking, concrete Commonwealth Stadium. It's in a neighbourhood that has lost its shopkeepers, but hasn't gotten around to tearing down the shops, where you're reminded daily of what the place used to be. Behind her house is another, smaller bungalow-shaped space where Holst maintains her studio and office, and where she keeps the old-fashioned décor items and curiosities that influence her painting.

Her easel, set in the middle of the crowded but tidy space, is surrounded by stacks of CDs,



BELOW: Dana Holst, *Lassie*, oil on panel, 2006, 40" X 32".

BOTTOM: Dana Holst, *The Swing*, oil on canvas, 2003, 84" X 60".

OPPOSITE: Dana Holst, *Slow and Steady*, silver point on prepared paper, 2009, 7" X 5". Image including antique Victorian matt.



unused panel and canvas, a few paintings from past shows, including an oversized portrait of two near-identical girls in crushed-velvet playsuits, *The Swing* — created for her 2003 show *Dolly*. The walls are hung with finished paintings, drawings and studies for *Prey*, and a series of elaborate, empty frames, which she'll use in her show.

Holst collects frames, each one made with a distinctive technique full of meaning and tradition. They're among a few collections she's started of unusual vintage objects — early 20th century wax store mannequins, Victorian mourning jewellery woven from real hair, reverse-painted Essex crystal pendants and rings. Everything informs her work, including the files of antique photographs that she's searched out for their subject matter, either vintage scenes of girls in amateur dance performances, pageants and circuses, or surreal images of hunting excess — stacks of furs and carcasses displayed in unusual ways.

"In the past, I was more interested in power struggles between people," she says. "Now I'm more interested in power struggles between people and animals." But her work in *Prey*, as it has been through much of her work since she began showing in 1999, is mostly about human ego.

A picture of a hunter standing proudly with his kill has a certain measure of ego in it. Replace that man with a smiling, slightly demonic young girl, and the image becomes absurd, but the ego in it is even more pronounced, in part because of the performance aspect of it — these girls are putting on a show, leaving the dead animal with even less dignity.

In *Slow and Steady*, two young girls in neat pageboy haircuts and floaty dance dresses pose in front of a fireplace. One of them is holding a net, and the other clutches a hunting knife. In the foreground, a tortoise walks obliviously, its neck outstretched, and hung above the mantel is the stuffed head of a rabbit. Holst has lovingly matted the scene like a treasured family portrait, and indeed these girls are posing proudly.

In *In the Dark*, another girl, this one about eight or nine years old, wears a red party dress and saddle shoes. She's sitting with her arms wrapped around her knees, smiling beatifically in front of an elaborate, William Morris-style wallpaper. Except that one of the birds in the scene isn't part of the wallpaper detail — it's hanging next to the girl with a piece of wire around its neck. Holst has been filling her canvases with an odd assortment of backdrops and pageantry, concentrating on reproducing period room décor and group scenes, adding meticulous details that somehow underscore with their innocence and beauty the unsettling central portraits.

Each of the paintings and drawings in *Prey* shows off the human instinct to stalk and kill animals, particularly when it's done for fun, or to show off. But that said, Holst has no moral opinions on hunting — she's more concerned with its clues to the human psyche and its motivations. She describes the work in the show as "a look at the need to act out upon and keep in touch with primal urges, filtered through a sanitized world of industrial and computer prowess where human hunters use technology against lowly beasts — often to unfair advantage."

She adds that by toying with her original source imagery she "illuminates the human folly of pride and greed by showcasing the turning point beyond hunting for survival into the realm of hunting for power." The trophy kills become part of the amateur performances Holst's girls are so proud of.

As she was preparing the work for *Prey*, Holst started thinking ahead, considering the idea of emerging from a sort of self-imposed artistic exile in Edmonton. "I've become known as the Edmonton painter who never shows in Edmonton," she says, peering out the window from her backyard studio. In addition to the 2003 show at Vanderlelie, this is only the second time she's had a show in the city, where she moved in 2001.

Her next project is to bring together some young Edmonton figurative artists for a group show called *Betwixt and Between*. Over the years she's been discovering the work of painters she admires, like Travis McEwan, whose series of boys' portraits has the same emotional quality as Holst's girls. She also wants to have her own work seen more widely in Edmonton, and possibly start to explore the artistic scenes in other places around Alberta. It's time to let the girls out to play again.

Dana Holst, *Prey* is on at the Latitude 53 Gallery in Edmonton May 28 to July 4.

