

The Halifax

# COMMONER

## COMMENTARY: DAL LIBRARY'S NEW PAINTING A SLEEPER ... HIT?

FEBRUARY 13, 2013 BY PETER MARRACK IN OPINION



Michelle Gallant (right) and Peter Dykhuis (left) of the Dalhousie Art Gallery agree looking at a painting is like going to a movie.; one of your friends probably isn't going to like what they see. (Photo: Peter Marrack)

Have you noticed the big painting hanging over the main stairs at Dalhousie University's Killam Library?

You know which one I mean. It's of the guy sprawled out on a bed, on top of the sheets, with his shoes and clothes still on. It replaced an old macramé piece in December.

At first, I interpreted it as depicting a student so exhausted from studying — bingeing, if you will — that he couldn't muster the strength to undress or pull the sheets back.

Which pissed me off.

As a fan of books and writing, I think of libraries as exotic treasure troves, places you go to bask in the fountains of knowledge and marvel at great literary jewels — not to down Adderall and stare at a MacBook for 12 hours straight.

And had it been the 18th century, I may have believed that, too. But then no student's going to petition administration to throw a kegger in stacks U to Z, let alone visit the library for fun.

So, I reconsidered. I decided the painting's more of a reflection, a mirror that kicks back an image of its viewer — in this case, the student body, stale and fatigued.

I also did some research.

A Montreal-based artist, Susan G. Scott, painted it for a series of installations that were shown at a gallery in Los Angeles in 1987. Scott says she painted the piece, entitled *As for me, I still have you; here*, as an homage to gay couples, as some of her friends had died during the AIDS crisis of the '80s.

Scott also says the title references a line from a letter sent from the French poet, Arthur Rimbaud, when he was 17, to another French poet, Paul Verlaine. They were lovers and Verlaine had traveled to visit his wife and kids in Paris, leaving Rimbaud alone.

"His lover is gone, but in his mind he's still there. He's dreaming about him. He's remembering their time together," says Scott in an interview, identifying Rimbaud as the boy in the painting.

"I think it's a dreamy painting. I think it's a painting that has some reverie in it."

Bill Maes, the former librarian at Killam, and Tina Usmiani, the former communications coordinator, helped select two of Scott's paintings, *As for me* and another called *Study*, for the library. They picked them out more than two years ago, but they just arrived from the Dalhousie Art Gallery in December.

Maes cites size as a major factor in the selection process, as well as in the lengthy delay. He and Usmiani agree the painting, *As for me*, helps to calm its viewer.

"In the library space it becomes an image of silence of peacefulness and serenity.... I liked the fact that it

was a younger boy. That was something that was unusual to have in an academic library,” says Usmiani.

As for student reactions, the people I’ve spoken to see it as a sleeping person and, burnt out from studying as they are, they envy him. Comments submitted anonymously to the library, which are now posted on the library’s comment board, tell a brasher story.

“Why would you hang portraits of a habit we are deprived of at Dal? This is outrageous. Please be more artistically considerate next time,” wrote one commenter.

“Hanging a picture of someone sleeping is the worst idea ever.... It makes me want to sleep in the library.... zzz,” wrote another.

Peter Dykhuis, the director and curator of the Dalhousie Art Gallery, who helped arrange the loan of the painting, offered an analogy.

“It’s like if the painting was of someone drinking beer. You’d have people piping up that drinking’s not acceptable. But then that says more about them than the painting. Maybe that person doesn’t like beer.”

Scott considers the painting a reverie, a longing for better times. The library team that picked it liked its size, and calming effect.

Students, at least some of them, say it puts them to sleep. And Dykhuis, Dal’s art guru, admits it could mean any number of things, depending on who’s looking.

As for me, I’ve analyzed the darned thing for so long I’m neutral. I see nothing.

All I can do is think back to when it made me angry, and remember.

In that sense, the painting’s of me.