

# Art in America

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

FEBRUARY 2017



View of Iris Häussler's exhibition "The Sophie La Rosière Project," 2016, at the Art Gallery of York University.

## IRIS HÄUSSLER

### Art Gallery of York University and Scrap Metal

In past works, Iris Häussler has subsumed her identity in fictional artistic personae. Presenting "The Sophie La Rosière Project" (2009–) in concurrent exhibitions at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) and Scrap Metal, she dispensed with the ruse and disclosed her authorship up front, weaving an immersive fiction with historical facts.

At each location, a chronology sketched out the life of Sophie La Rosière, a fictitious avant-garde artist born in 1867 in the Parisian suburb of Nogent-sur-Marne. (At AGYU, the timeline did not distinguish invention from historical information, but at Scrap Metal facts were printed in gray and the rest of the story was in black.) Häussler locates La Rosière's death in 1948 at a real senior home for artists, which was established by actual people, the French sisters Jeanne and Madeleine Smith, the latter an artist in the academic style.

We learn that La Rosière arrived at the home with a set of paintings on doors and disassembled furniture panels, all smothered with black encaustic. These paintings were the centerpiece of the AGYU show. A two-room space constructed in one gallery represented La Rosière's studio. Inside were panels in different sizes that recall headstones and smell intensely of beeswax. There were also unwaxed examples of paintings, revealing images of abstracted female limbs, torsos, and genitals; these depictions are rendered with materials like paint, blood, and crushed flower petals. Another gallery of the exhibition contained eight vitrines filled with objects, such as sketchbooks, blood-stained cloths and erotic postcards, that were supposedly retrieved from the artist's house in Nogent.

Häussler establishes in the timeline that La Rosière

had a close friendship as a teenager with Madeleine Smith (the eventual coowner of the retirement home) and that her parents subsequently sent her to a convent for five years. However, it was a later relationship with the fictional Florence that inspired the erotic compositions. Florence, a young artist's model, met Sophie at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, a real Montparnasse art school founded by a woman, when the latter enrolled in 1905.

The Scrap Metal show presented documentary-style videos and X-rays of La Rosière's encaustic paintings. In a video made with Catherine Sicot (director and curator of Toronto's Elegoa Cultural Productions), a French researcher and art conservator explains how radiography penetrates the encaustic. In another video, two Parisian psychoanalysts speculate that Sophie's eventual abandonment by Florence drove her to conspicuously hide the erotic content in her work, knowing that it would be rediscovered years later. One of the psychoanalysts suggests that "sexual satisfaction is more obtainable through sublimation than through the sexual act itself."

Hardly alone in the use of artist heteronyms, Häussler, who was born in Germany and lives in Toronto, brings to mind multimedia pioneer Vera Frenkel, another foreign-born Torontonians. Frenkel invented a Canadian writer named Cornelia Lumsden in the late 1970s for a videotape project that also incorporated factual information. Playing to the art world's penchant for rediscovering lost or forgotten artists, Häussler succeeds in enmeshing the viewer in the intricacies of her fictitious world.

—Milena Tomic