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Pedro Cabrita Reis goes without the flow in Power Plant exhibition

Electrical Safety Authority turns off the lights, but Reis' *A Broken Line* powers on; also Winnie Truong and Tony Scherman's different views of the female image



dro Cabrita Reis' *A Broken Line* at the Power Plant after the plug was pulled. (Murray Whyte / Toronto Star) | [Order this photo](#)

Pedro

By **MURRAY WHYTE** Visual arts

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The thing that strikes you most about the work of Pedro Cabrita Reis now on view at the Power Plant is not so much what it is, but what it's not — specifically, illuminated: Wires dangle from angular aluminum girders that pinwheel chaotically in all directions, but the fluorescent tubes with which they're fitted are conspicuously dark. The sense is vaguely postapocalyptic, as though the last one here followed the appropriate end-of-days order and turned out the lights.

The truth of it is significantly more mundane. A few weeks after its fall opening, the work, called *A Broken Line*, was paid a rare visit by an inspector from the Electrical Safety Authority. He cited a litany of code violations: that the exposed wires posed a danger to the public; that the fluorescent tubes Reis had employed, imported from his native Portugal, were not authorized for use in Canada; that the lights were mounted without casing and directly onto wood. Art, meet life: in short order, the plug was pulled for good.

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You can imagine the gallery taking such news as outright disaster. Reis, a celebrated artist with an international reputation, had been brought here for a series of high-profile commissions (*A Broken Line* was one of three). To run afoul of local electrical code violations — and indeed, for them to win out — would seem like a victory for the close-minded provincial practicality for which our country continues to be known. Maybe in protest, or more likely in disappointment, at least two speakers invited to discuss the work cancelled.

Looking at the show in its dying days, though, I beg to differ. *A Broken Line* has presence, no matter the state of its electrical connection. Jagged arms of aluminum stretch awkwardly throughout the space, both guiding and hindering your movement through it. They're bleak and ominous, less deliberate-seeming than the remnants of a disaster that left no one to clean up.

Across the hall from where [Julia Dault](#)'s candy-coloured works are coolly calculated confections, Reis offers instead a bracingly glorious entropy. Word has it that, far from a disaster, the artist regarded the disconnect as a weirdly welcome opportunity. I love this guy: in that gleefully capital-C Conceptual way, there's only so much you can control, as the installation of *A Broken Line* made clear (a couple of collapses during installation were left where they fell, in that very spirit).

The intrusion of the real world isn't necessarily to be taken as an affront so much as simply what is. As it stands — or leans, or lies splayed — *A Broken Line* is more a question than an answer: Is it in the process of being built or dismantled? When the answer is both, or neither, things get far more interesting, don't they?

Meanwhile, at Erin Stump Projects, you'll find the most recent show by the young Toronto artist Winnie Truong, whose intricately fluid, visceral and creepily perfect drawings are on display until Dec. 20. I can't stop looking at these things and small wonder: rendered in bleakly bright colour — a washed-out pink, a sickly aquamarine — her intensely tightly bundled line drawings seduce at the same time as they repel.

Truong has a mastery of her chosen medium few I've seen can match and she uses that precision to both amplify and subvert her subject matter, which is almost exclusively human hair. A large diptych parallels the braided buns of two women, seen from behind, in a rainbow of sickly yellows, pinks and blues, while others pieces are oblique: geometric tangles of fibre for which no source can be seen.

You can read it as a none-too-subtle critique of the beauty imperative our hyperactively voyeuristic culture places on women, to be coiffed, preened and camera-ready for the omnipresent photo opportunities of our current world, but don't lose sight of the astute formalism Truong expertly plies, treading a line between the visceral and abstract with an aplomb only remotely achievable by her exceptional skill. A knockout.

At Georgia Scherman Projects, you'll see the female figure captured by a very different gaze, that of the unapologetically male Tony Scherman (if you're wondering, yes, father to the aforementioned daughter).

Scherman is one of this country's pre-eminent senior painters, if not universally adored (a little conflict, to my mind, is a good thing) and to his credit, he does little to undermine it. The show is called *Difficult Women*, just to set the tone, and it's a suite of portraiture rendered in the artist's typically visceral, materially present encaustic medium.

The images are thick with paint and wax, almost as though submerged in a dark, partly remembered dream. This could read as reductive, violent even, but Scherman has the aplomb to set his medium against his subject — not to mention his title — in such a way that a singular reading would be not only impossible but dangerous. An exceptionally bleak portrait of Margaret Thatcher, sickly gold and from the neck up only, swimming in a hazy sea of black, is the tonal opposite to Malala, a strong, elegant and quietly beatific portrait of Malala Yousafzai, whom by now we all know was the victim of a Taliban attack and has since become a Nobel Peace Prize winner and global champion of women's rights.

Scherman portrays a range of women too diverse to unify under any one rubric: Rosa Parks, Simone de Beauvoir, Serena Williams, an unnamed bread thief, an anonymous suffragette, a terrified “witch” just before execution in Salem, seen in a bleak pinkish glow as a cluster of panic-stricken facial features.

In so doing, he subverts the shopworn notion of the male gaze with the inevitable question: Difficult to whom? Anyone got a problem with that?