

**Kristi Ropeleski, Blue Skies**  
by Edwin Janzen

Is there anything as momentary and ineffable — yet as universally sought after — as happiness? Suffering and its causes are identifiable, earthly, tangible, and we all know them well enough: painful injuries, financial stress, guilt, loss of loved ones, anger over injustice, and so on. Few can say the same of happiness. While everyone experiences it in moments, deep, abiding happiness remains elusive to all but a few. That nearly everyone seeks it, however — the United States of America even enshrine the pursuit of it in their constitution — places happiness at a remove somewhere in the future: an abstraction we may only experience through optimism, faith and hope. With her exhibition at articule, entitled *Blue Skies*, Montreal painter Kristi Ropeleski moves us to explore this alien, abstract realm.

In the titular painting, a dark-haired, dark-eyed young man in a white shirt extends his hands toward us, as a narrow rainbow arcs from his one hand to the other, and bleeds into both. He is backlit by blue light — perhaps the black-light of a dance bar, a gay bar perhaps, as the rainbow connotes — and behind him is blackness. Does the luminous imply the numinous, as it does in many traditions? Do these signs suggest we are in the presence of a god? Does the rainbow promise a divinely inspired hope? Or is it just that we want this handsome fellow to ask us to dance? And would that not also be a divine hope?

Such a hope is at the centre of *What's mine is yours*, in which the art-viewer relationship in the painting *Blue Skies* is reversed. We find ourselves contemplating what appears to be a discarded wad of fleshy-looking pink chewing gum, but easy readings of vaginal or penile forms quickly give way to deeper considerations of space, time, information and personality. The gum's foldedness perhaps represents a kind of historicity, challenging us to consider the selectivity of what is revealed over against what is concealed: the extant power of evidence and the potential power of secrets (future evidence). The gum has a past — even a character — and thus we experience a certain pathos as we consider that this little gum-entity is necessarily a cast-off. Its magnified state of hyper-visibility contrasts with the invisibility of the unwanted, the homeless. "What's mine is yours" — sure enough.

Ropeleski's works are potent explorations of the symbols of happiness, romance, hope and desire. *Red Eye*, for example, draws together two much-romanticized phenomena — sunsets and air travel — thereby confusing and playing them against one another. Drained of colour, we are left only with the sunset's vast scale, which dwarfs the plane (its size, its course, its velocity), infantilizing us — and, no doubt, our ideas about things like sunsets. We then recall that we live in our own minds amid a constellation of concepts and symbols — a world which, small though it be, is still potentially larger than our physical home.

In another painting, *Untitled*, a young woman in a black tank top keeps a cool eye on a distant goal. She erupts into the painting out of a burst of hot-pink brushstrokes — practically a distillation of feminine desire and determination — as the wind plays with her hair and her pink scarf dotted with black hearts. Yet, this wind seems inseparable from the woman, behind whom is a dynamic sky, which, too, seems more like an extension of the woman than an actual sky. A little like a great *Facebook* profile photo, *Untitled* is less a documentary representation of a woman so much as a tableau in which the woman is only one of a set of symbols expressing her emotional or spiritual condition. The brunette in *Hold Still*, smiling, wearing a colourful floral print and shiny red lipstick, gazes out at us suggestively as her hands, seven of them, caress a jungle of pink and orange flowers, their stigmas, filaments and anthers nubile, almost tumescent. Depicted as some kind of elemental being, she is at first like a goddess, but maybe not quite — the cheap “Love” pendant on her chest marks her as human.

In monotheistic traditions it is generally impossible to look upon the face of God and live. In polytheistic ones, one might say that it is impossible to look upon the face of a god or goddess and not be extremely uncomfortable. This supposition may offer us a starting point from which to approach two more of Ropeleski’s works — the first titled *Hey, How’s it Going?*, the second, *Untitled* — which feature giant, female heads hovering in the air absent any familiar point of reference (no background landscape, no attached body). In each, the suspended head, conspicuously lipsticked, challenges the viewer, gazing out at us intensely, even dreadfully, though without obvious malice — perhaps, rather, a seemingly benevolent omniscience. Does dread of the benevolent here augur the presence of a goddess or the memory of the smothering love of a parent? The long, pointed spikes protruding from the face in *Untitled* remind us that love and authority are never a comfortable fit. “This is for your own good.” “I just want you to be happy!” In parents, superior knowledge appears to the child as exasperating smugness, and thus are forced to consider the comfortable stupidity of the human face in a state of moral assurance. We become children again, confronting the undeserving yet immovable authority of our elders, and we might reflect again upon how difficult it has been for us to move our conceptions of divinity beyond the anthropomorphic.

With her third giant, disembodied head, also *Untitled*, Ropeleski moves the viewer away from the parent-child paradigm toward a deeper point. This piece, a beautiful young woman’s head hovering on its field of pale pink, appears not to notice us. She seems absorbed in her own nature — a cosmic nature: her freckles float off her cheeks like satellites threatening to enter orbit and her strands of hair remind one, perhaps, of solar flares. Even her facial features are like continental plates in motion, tectonic, with one eye slightly higher than the other and a pouty, lopsided mouth. This head effectively explodes the myth of symmetrical beauty even as it forms itself into its own mini-universe. The conception of the human being as microcosm of the wider world goes back to the philosophers of ancient Greece — probably earlier — and comes down to us through the Middle Ages through the practice of alchemy, a practice traditionally described through the metaphor of the transformation of base metals into gold.

Like alchemy, the pursuit of happiness insists upon faith, promises certain struggle and holds out faint hope. But like the happy blue of the summer sky, which performs the important service of preventing us from always looking upon dark infinities, maybe this sliver of hope is just enough.

**Kristi Ropeleski** is a Montreal based artist. Her paintings have been exhibited internationally over the span of the past 10 years in diverse venues such as The Philoctetes Center for the Study of the Imagination in New York city and at the Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art. She has studied at Dawson College, Concordia University and holds a Master's degree in Visual Arts from York University in Toronto. She is a member of the Faculty of Fine Arts at Dawson College and The Visual Arts Center.

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This text is part of a writing series by members of the gallery, reflecting on the works presented during articule's 2010-2011 programming season. Edwin Janzen's text has been produced for Kristi Ropeleski's exhibition *Blue Skies* presented at articule from November 5 to December 5, 2010, and is also available as a pdf on the gallery's website.



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