

## *Chris Cran's Bright Spiral Standard at Clint Roenisch*

**Murray Whyte**  
**Toronto Star**  
**April 24, 2009**

The first time I saw Chris Cran's work up close and personal was in, of all places, Owen Sound, at the Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery in 1999. Cran's touring retrospective, *Surveying the Damage, 1977-1997*, was orbiting the city of Toronto proper (the closest it got to downtown was at MOCCA, back when it was in North York), and the Thomson gallery was a curious fit -- or so it seemed: Cran's a painter, of course, but the closest thing to landscape I saw in that show was one of Cran's elaborately popist, cartoony self-portraits, in which the artist, decked out in trademark fedora and blazer, his face turned from view, wallowed in a waist-deep in a swamp, armed with a wooden rifle. Alongside him, a troop of Amazonian women wearing only ammo belts laid waste to an army advancing from a nearby village, shooting from the hip with their AK-47s.

He called it "Self-Portrait with Combat Nymphs of Saigon;" it was equal parts 70s-era Nick Fury comics and Russ Meyer movies (and no parts Group of 7), and as instructive an entry to Cran's oeuvre as any. Over a quarter century, Cran, a Calgarian, has been a veritable genre mixmaster, playfully mixing elements of pop art with some clever deconstructions of the form itself.

For a show of new work at the Clint Roenisch Gallery, which opened last week, Cran offer's some new twists on some old tricks. Amazons aside, the show features several portraits that would be familiar to anyone who knows his work: Rough, photographic-seeming portraits, often dot-matrix style, like a newsprint blow-up, tracked with bright vertical lines.

There's an obvious formal conceit here, of course, as Cran processes photography through painting, giving it an indistinctness alien to the notion of the form; at the same time, he's exploding painting's myth of perspective, offering it in the image, then taking it away again with the vertical bars that completely flatten perspective back down to the plane of the canvas. In true trickster form, Cran puts a fine point on it in *Awake* (2009), at right, skewing a crude line-drawn portrait overtop the traditional rendering; so withdrawn

from the surface, it seems almost underwater.

Cran can be heady, questioning the very nature of the medium he's devoted his practice to; at his best, he's a polemicist, tackling the aesthetic debate about representation, and the Classical/Modern/Postmodern rifts all at once; but none of this would mean a thing if his work wasn't so darn engaging. Staring a Cran portrait in the face can be a dizzying, almost Escher-esque experience, as your brain tries to square the competing perspectives your eyes are delivering to it for processing. Cran presents a multi-layered practice in theory, but the fact he can put it all together, right in front of your bewildered and bemused eyes, is what makes him great.