

Janet Werner
Earthling (Red Sweater), 2012
Oil on canvas
274.3 × 198.1 cm
Collection of the Musée d'art
contemporain de Montréal
Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay

Recent Acquisition

Janet Werner is among the number of artists who are contributing to a revival of painting, with an enigmatic body of work that can be broached from both the viewpoint of the subjects represented and the larger modernist tradition. The portrait—a genre she has revisited for several years—plays a key role in her practice, as is admirably illustrated by *Earthling (Red Sweater)*, 2012, one of the museum's recent acquisitions.

Werner's striking works, of sometimes glacial intensity, combine the portrait genre and practice with strictly pictorial and formal concerns. The portrait becomes the scene of an exploration where painting is pushed to the very limit: the use of colour—the dominant red and blue of *Earthling (Red Sweater)*—goes beyond the realism associated with portraiture; the frontal view adopted by the picture, its monumentality, the absence of illusionistic depth, the woman's oblique, absorbed gaze rekindle the notions of absorption put forward by the celebrated American art historian Michael Fried. These formal qualities are engaged in a dialogue with history at the same time as they form the basis of a most contemporary deliberation: the ordinary-looking figure poses in the place of the classic "noble" figures; and the inertia of the body may recall the relentless immobility of photography, just as the importance the artist attaches to the representation of female subjects, who are anonymous but tinged with subjectivity, may be understood in relationship to feminist discourses or as a critique of the loss of humanity in our societies. In *Earthling (Red Sweater)*, the features seem slightly exaggerated, unreal: the blue hair, which we initially explain through a pictorial logic, also has the effect of diverting us from our own reality. Here, this fictional dimension, often noted in the work of Janet Werner, may well stretch beyond other boundaries. It is this complexity, this depth of the image, that gives her portraits their strange, elusive appearance and their power of attraction.

Janet Werner was born in Winnipeg in 1959. She lives and works in Montréal. Her works have been widely exhibited and are currently on view in the group show *Oh, Canada*, at Mass MoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, in North Adams), until April 1, 2013. **Marie Fraser, Chief Curator and Director of Education**

