

A body of work



TODD WITH PEARLS
BY EDMUND HAAKONSON

by **Darin Hagen**

I suppose that, on some level, many of us can say we are inspired by the male form.

Appreciation of the nude body is something that has driven artists for centuries. Nowhere is that inspiration more evident than in the work of Edmund Haakonson. Sitting in his Edmonton studio, one is struck by the ease of his adoration. Several large paintings are underway. "I can only work on small portions at a time. I have to do six at a time to get a full day's work," he says. He starts pulling others from piles of canvases around the room; soon, a population of nude and seminude forms, rendered in vivid symmetry, surrounds us. The skin on the men seems to glow, even on this gray day, due to the countless layers of glaze Haakonson employs in his work.

"First thing our readers are going to want to know is where you find your models," say I.

"Most of them are waiters. Most of them straight."

Is there such a thing? I wonder.

He unveils *Todd With Pearls*. I remember the day he first showed it to me, soon after he finished it. Haakonson had an excited glow about him, that flushed satisfaction one receives after completing something that exceeds all expectations. When I finally got past looking at Todd, at that beautiful man gazing so openly, I noticed his jewelry: an outrageously feminine pearl and rhinestone necklace.

Haakonson's recent work comes from a fascination with the "state of being", the

communication of more than a physical presence. "What I find fascinating about people is what they project to the world as their personality and what they try to hide, and why."

His work has been called homoerotic. "I can understand why," says Haakonson, "as soon as you have male sexuality, it's automatically homoerotic, because we're taught not to see or look at male sexuality." He has also been criticized for not painting female nudes, a staple of inspiration in the art world. "It's just not what I'm really good at," he says simply. "The male nude inspires me."

His work elicits some strong responses. People aren't used to seeing the naked male form portrayed quite this sensually, or with as much loving detail.

Many of the works

contain elaborate architecture—columns, arches, and the casual air of the models offsets these neoclassical structures. The men grace these settings in a relaxed, contemplative manner; the architecture is detailed and precise. This is an element that has made its way into his work in the last year as he was honing his skills by reproducing some works of the old masters. The architecture just "struck something" in him. "Architecture is proof that, given opportunity and resources, humans can create incredible things."

The works he considers most successful are the ones that inspire questions from the viewer. "When a picture creates a desire to 'figure out' something about it, then I feel I have a successful piece of work. It is very much in keeping with my personality; I don't like to give the whole story on the first meeting."

He also doesn't like telling people what his paintings "mean". By not pronouncing the final word, he is constantly amazed when someone tells him what they see in a piece. He appreciates being able to see it himself once it is pointed out, having never been conscious of putting it there.

So what provides an artist with the "soul-fuel" it takes to continue in a world that sometimes views art as a frill or a luxury? For Haakonson, music affects his energy while he's painting. "Classical music is perfect for the meditative state I want," he says. Literature is another source of inspiration.

He states that he is most inspired by "seeing the old masters, and being

overwhelmed by that ability; that someone is capable of smearing pigment on a surface, creating something that inspires an emotional response; the mystery of that, and the desire to accomplish the same thing."

Haakonson is a born artist. He's been drawing since he was old enough to hold a pen. In grade one, he realized that he wanted to excel at it. His first set of oils was a hobby kit at age nine. He painted a big duck.

Now he's a thirty-year-old professional artist with a B.F.A. from the U of A, and in full command of his craft. All through this month his work will be on display at Manifesto Gallery, (10043 - 102 st.) in a show called *To Hell and Back*. You can view it from November 2-28 from 10:00 am-8:00 pm. The show represents months of non-stop work for Haakonson.

If a trip to Edmonton is not possible, check out his brand new website: <http://plaza.powersurfr.com/haakonsonart>. Several of his nudes are on display there in full, "breathing" color.

To meet the artist in person, check out the reception on the evening of Saturday, Nov. 7. Haakonson will be there, secretly watching reactions. "If they don't know you're watching them, they're not guarded," he explains.

As for his future, Haakonson says he'd like "...to be able to paint, and support myself doing it." At thirty, he's living his dream. "In my twenties, I felt like I had to constantly prove myself to my art. Now, I feel that my art has started to prove itself to me."