

Sydney Vermont
Fishing for Soul
Beehive Hair Lounge
4385 Main Street

The figure of speech, "a dog's life," can be read in several ways. One way sees a miserable and unimportant life without direction or purpose; another way sees a carefree and uninhibited life full of pleasure and leisure. Sydney Vermont clearly prefers the latter, and this choice is hardly capricious. Fishing for Soul, a diverse mixed media work that runs throughout the Beehive Hair Lounge, including a painting, a video and a sculpture, has at least one important message: that life could be good. This idea of "a good life" is expressed as a kind of naïve utopianism -- perhaps the only kind, which isn't to lessen its emotional and intellectual value, or its possible, real-world political potency. Each aspect of the work conveys and reinforces this utopian urge. The painting has dogs frolicking and fornicating in a golden, frictionless landscape, marked only by a rainbow. The video is a montage of dogs walking around outdoors, wagging careless tails. While the sculpture, a cascading waterfall made of coloured beads, with pieces of mirror on the ceiling, is mounted above the sinks where hair is washed in possible redemption.

The painting is most clearly a depiction of utopia. In terms of a dog's life,

it couldn't be better: a rainbow watches over a field of soothing, ubiquitous sunshine, dogs doing whatever they like. Although the surface of the painting is somewhat worn and cracked, this doesn't imply danger or suggest decay, more a kind of timelessness: the dogs will play forever; the landscape will remain luminous. The video provides an anchor and a point of contrast to the dogs in the painting. Here, real dogs are on walks with their owners. Seemingly untroubled, the dogs exude joy; it's as though they have read Hegel and understand -- and believe fully -- the emancipatory potential of the master slave dialectic. Obviously never the "master," the dogs somehow know that the future lies with them, that they lead history in anticipation of the Absolute. In contrast, the video shows people holding the leashes, seemingly unable to comprehend the contentment of the dogs, perhaps afraid. As always, the leashes represent an effort to tame nature, to control the unknowable.

Not coincidentally, a utopia is also, strictly speaking, unknowable: it is a non-place, impossible. What could be more impossible than a waterfall that comes from the ceiling? Echoing the naïve joy of the dogs, the waterfall is the first wholly human element: although ramshackle, it is pure mimesis. Nothing else in the work represents as directly the

fallibility of humanity, or its desire to change, to reach for utopia, however impossible. And this impossible wish is the progressive political value of the search for utopia: this fantasy challenges the limitations of the real world. The waterfall also puts the title of the work in perspective. Like the idea of nature or a vision of utopia, the notion of the soul becomes shorthand for self-reflection. Of course, Jesus was supposedly a fisherman, but this story also subverts Christian mythology by placing Jesus in the real world. Since Vermont,s message is also secular, its religious undertone is meant to humanize the divine, not reify it, which is also her intention with the spirit of utopia.

Head back in the sink, the viewer sees his or her own reflection in the pieces of mirror above, as though heaven has been ruined by secularhumanism. Although the image is broken, this is necessary, part of the process: it,s the starting point for a new, human-made deliverance, a redeemed future suggested by the ritual act of washing, this time in the everyday context of a hair salon. As a result, our sins as well as our dependence on metaphysics wash out, replaced by the godless dream of achieving heaven on earth. Also godless, the dogs continue to frolic in the background, inspiring us with their effortless freedom. Thus, like the simple pleasure of a well-done haircut, Vermont,s utopian message

subtly and gently alters our perception, infinitesimally
improving our lives,
revealing the way of the good life. This message is not
dogmatic, though,
just encouraging, which is, after all, the only way to
begin anything.

Brandy