

# VANCOUVER COURIER

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### 'SHADOWS IN THE MIRROR' REFLECTS AN ANXIOUS HENNI ALFTAN

by Kris McDermott / Westender



Artist Henni Alftan's first solo exhibition in North America, *Shadows in the Mirror*, runs until May 8  
Photograph By CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Sitting down with world-renowned artist Henni Alftan will expose any lack of knowledge one may have about the visual arts with uncanny expediency.

In person, Alftan is every bit of the Finnish-Parisian artist that one would dream up as an archetype: the Helsinki-born daughter of a journalist and a writer, frequenting coffee shops across from large art galleries and seemingly never caught sans scarf.

Alftan's first solo exhibition in North America is being showcased at the Z Gallery Arts (102-1688 West 1st Ave.) until May 8. Entitled *Shadows in the Mirror*, the 15-piece, oil-on-canvas exclusive collection explores the symbiotic relationship between the oil, canvas and materials.

Making it a point to create her often-poetic musings in simple geometric fashion, Alftan eschews using models to pre-create what is eventually born onto the canvas. By the time oil is set to canvas, though, the Edinburgh College of Art graduate has already shaped her image to perfection on a smaller scale. Measured and finely crafted, Alftan openly expresses her dispassion for the meticulous way she begins all of her pieces. Because she affords herself only the knowledge of what she is going to paint, with nothing but the limitations of geometry to bind her, Alftan often sees herself starting over and reworking the path to her destination. She does not, however, allow herself to pick a new subject or allow a model of an individual item to enter into her realm of inspiration. To put it simply, if Alftan decides to paint a tree, the end result in a tree created by the painter, not a tree plucked from the woods via

photograph and used as a visual aide.

Through the use of framing, lighting, and shading, Alftan's work is best described as profound. Her at-a-glance look at the "mundane everyday" threads an ominous tone throughout this collection. There is a certain uneasiness intrinsic to Alftan's expressions in *Shadows* that either reports on, or in some situations is the cause of, a certain anxiousness, coming to a head in the pieces *The Visitor* and *Parking lot*.

For all her strife during, Alftan admits to quite liking the final creation process, once the kinks and obstacles are worked out. For some, the "thrill of the hunt" or working out the equation is the reward. For Alftan, the enjoyment comes at the stage of the project when problem-solving and starting over has been replaced with simple execution.

As Alftan explained, during a meetup with the *Westender* at a coffee shop downtown, she prefers the freedom that comes with not only knowing how it's going to end, but how she plans to get there. A lot like a musician who does not particularly enjoy writing music but savours performing live, Alftan cannot reap the sought-after rewards without first having to decipher the laborious riddle she has presented herself.

*Shadows in the Mirror* does well to contrast simplicity with depth in a fashion that transcends off of the canvas, intrinsically linking the viewer and the piece. And what else is art, if not a conduit for emotional transference and an expression for relatability or bonding?

After briefly meeting Alftan it would seem that the anxiety that exudes from her current oil-on-canvas collection is a direct extension of the former Beaux-Arts de Paris disciple. Alftan proves with *Shadow in the Mirror* that a piece of the artist remains with the work beyond the visual representation left on the canvas.

With a preference towards having the observer interpret what they see in her creations as unabated as possible, the profundity that *Shadows in the Mirror* often manifests is admirable. With so much of Alftan's prior work utilising the symbolism of water, one should note that only one piece, *Still Water*, represents the unknown (or the unconscious) in the 15-piece anthology. Perhaps the certainty of Alftan's preparation has reached a comforting plateau that no longer sees the artist questioning the many unknowns in that regard.