

Artist airbrushes a world of imperfect reality

BY CHRISTOPHER HUME
ART CRITIC

Michaela Jordana admits her paintings take ages to complete, but even by her standards 15 years is a long time.

Of course, there were a few delays along the way. Soon after she started the mammoth canvas, *Adrift*, in 1977 she formed The Poles, a new wave band that recorded and performed in Toronto and New York. Then there was parenthood. After that there was teaching.

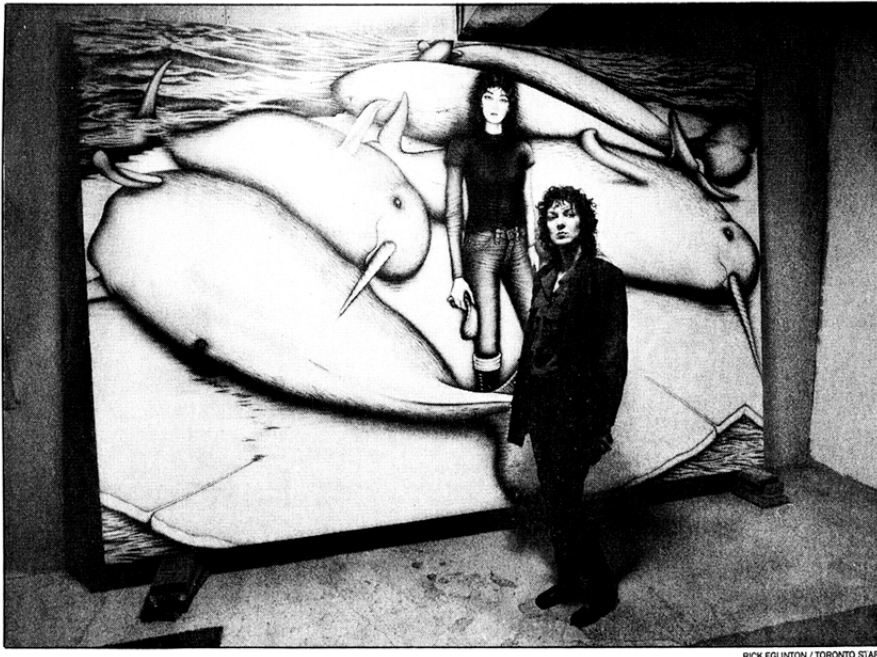
Now, ensconced in her studio in the heart of darkest Etobicoke, Jordana is back painting. The electric keyboard still occupies a place of honor in her basement space, but what the visitor notices are the huge airbrushed pictures of people and whales over which the artist labors unceasingly.

Through all the permutations, Jordana has remained deeply committed to animals.

"I personally am a survivor and a very compassionate person," she explains. "I can't stand any form of cruelty. I feel agonized when I see animals being slaughtered and hurt. All my work has got to do with this senseless killing and cruelty."

In 1988, Jordana mounted *Storming Heaven*, a multimedia performance piece in which she lamented the wanton destruction of killer whales. But full 11 years before that, she had an exhibition of paintings at the old Isaacs Gallery that addressed the same issue. Even the recently completed canvas, *Adrift*, shows the artist standing among ice floes littered with dead whales.

"Art is my comfort," explains



RICK EGLINTON / TORONTO STAR

POWER AND PASSION: Michaela Jordana's paintings often feature whales as almost-religious symbols of agony. "I feel like I've got radio antennae on my fingertips," she says. "Painting is me."

Jordana, who looks as if she just walked out of a Pre-Raphaelite picture. "I will spend the rest of my life painting."

Several years ago, she began a series of portraits using the

same air-brush technique she has employed from the beginning. It is a meticulous and demanding medium, one more commonly associated with customized vans and gas tanks on

chopped motorcycles.

But Jordana likes the soft-edged glossiness the air brush allows her. She calls it "that porcelain quality."

Certainly, her methods are

particularly well suited to the monumental whale pictures that first brought her to public attention. She documented the slaughter of orcas in all its bloodiness. If she didn't flinch

from portraying gory details, neither did she dwell on them.

Indeed, Jordana's paintings can be seen as a contemporary reworking of 16th-century religious subjects. The whales become martyrs whose bodies have been broken on the wheel of commerce or pierced with harpoons like so many cetaceous Saint Sebastians — their agony caught forever, unending.

"I never understood about the cross and blood until the whales," she comments. "My job in life is to radiate emotion and to translate emotion. With whales there is definitely a higher consciousness."

Jordana brings the same approach now to her portraits. Her self-portrait, for example, is titled *The Mourner*. It shows a sad-eyed woman with a Hebraic inscription above her head, part of a prayer for the dead.

"I was kind of crying when I did it," she says.

A second portrait, based on a photo of her 12-year-old daughter dressed up for Halloween, depicts a young woman with fangs dripping in blood. She might be a character from an Anne Rice novel.

"I want to paint portraits," Jordana declares. "I'm the kind of person who works and works and works. I take myself seriously as an artist."

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