

# Koh paints layers of identity

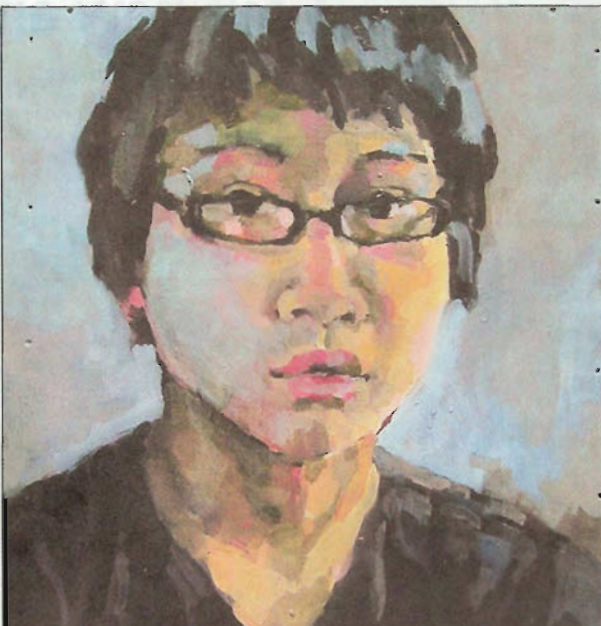
> BY ROBIN LAURENCE

A nifty segue of means and ideas occurs next weekend. Saturday (May 10) is the closing day of Germaine Koh's solo show at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery. The Friday before sees the opening of This Particular Day of June, the three-person exhibition in which she's participating at the Or Gallery. In different ways, the idea-driven works at her art dealer's space and the in-progress *Self-portrait* at the artist-run Or exemplify Koh's overarching themes.

"I would describe my work as an attempt to pay attention to overlooked, everyday processes that incrementally shape our lives," she says during an interview at the Jeffries Gallery. Born in Georgetown, Malaysia, and raised in Armstrong, B.C., Koh earned two undergraduate degrees at the University of Ottawa and a master's degree in fine arts at Hunter College in New York City. During the past decade, she has led such a peripatetic existence—lecturing, curating, and installing site-specific works across Canada and around the world—that she has resisted naming her home base. Recently, however, she seems to have settled here, in the city her migrating family passed through when she was a toddler.

Koh's *Self-portrait*—on view at the Or, along with works by Micah Lexier and Alejandro Cesarco, until June 14—takes a traditional form: oil painting on board. Like the rest of her art, however, it is process-based and concept-driven. Since starting it in 1994, she has overpainted it completely every year, so that each successive state takes a different register of its subject.

"It's not so much a portrait of an individual," Koh says. "It's more about the process of painting and about general processes of aging, changing." Then she adds: "Where I appear in my



Every year, concept-driven artist Germaine Koh reworks the surface of her *Self-portrait* to suggest universal processes of aging and transformation.

own work, it's most easily as a kind of generic everyperson...It's really not the romantic idea of the individual."

She points out that as a "minority artist," she may be expected to address identity politics. "But instead of focusing on differences and individuality, my work tends to focus on the things that bind us together, the things we have in common," she says. "That's one of the reasons I'm always dealing with known objects, found objects, things that people recognize."

As seen in Koh's Catriona Jeffries show, her work can allude to ocean waves and waves of immigration, to the rising and falling of the tide and the everyday flux of commerce, people,

cars, and vessels in this booming port city. More ominously, it also addresses the forces we allow to control us.

Such control may take the form of traffic signals, surveillance systems keyed to cellphones and PalmPilots, or the velvet ropes behind which we stand at theatres, concert halls, and nightclubs. Koh asks us to examine our willingness to relinquish our privacy, our agency, and even our health to systems and processes we don't understand.

"My work uses very mundane stuff," she observes, "but it tries to relate back to some grander movements of history, some grander cultural tendencies." ♦