

di west

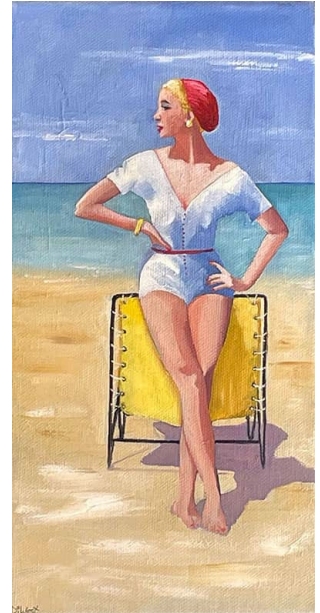
Femme

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The recent works of New Zealand-based Di West have once again been inspired by images of glamorously clad women from the late 40's and 50's Post-War era. "The timelessness of classic fashion and the elegance and grace of certain attire instantly pulls one back into those times," West imparts. "I grew up watching old Black & White movies and loved them. They became a significant influence on my art making. For me, fashion and art have always been intertwined."

In online research into 'fashionista' depictions from that epoch, the covers of prominent fashion magazines, particularly Harper's Bazaar and Vogue, attracted West's attention. Their vibrant photographs of swim-suited models, where strong design aesthetics and the principle of 'less is more' prevailed, became an influence in her own portrayals.

With the pruning of non-essential environment features, the femmes in West's paintings are also 'centre stage'. Her understanding of compositional factors is evident in their poses and garb detailing. The *Snood* image is a pertinent example of such. Hands on hips, legs nonchalantly crossed and head turned to the side to better display her snood, the female depicted has a confident demeanour. West tells of her interest in such headdresses, "A lot of the old movies I viewed as a kid had fabulous women like Esther Williams, Ginger Rogers and Carol Lombard wearing snoods to contain their flowing locks." Design considerations are evinced in the primary colours and alignments in this painting. Sky and water are blue, sand, beach chair and bracelet yellow, as is the blonde hair, while snood and narrow belt are a contrasting, vibrant red.



The *Pearls* painting is indeed a striking image given the long strings of pearls incongruously draped over the black swimsuit. West elucidates, "Back in the fifties pearls said it all and could be worn with absolutely anything! If you had a string of Mikimoto pearls, as my mother did, that was the ultimate height of fashion." Accordingly, the femme here, in overtly large white glasses, bears a rather imperious countenance. Design concerns are again at play in this picture. The horizontals of sky, ocean and bench are disrupted by the verticality of the seated figure. Placement of her hands with their red fingernail polish creates a triangular linking to the red bathing cap.

A touch of humour invests the title of the *38, 24, 38 Sir* painting. It would appear the blonde in blue bikini is giving the uniformed man her body measurements which equate to a proverbial 'hourglass' figure. However, West informs that he is in fact writing a citation ticket. This imagery had been fostered by a 1946, American newspaper article she'd come across that notified the wearing of swimsuits anywhere but on the beach itself was indecent. Robes were mandatory to and from the seaside. Perhaps this damsel had omitted to don one? The painterly approach in this work, as in *Summer Breeze*, is far looser than usual. West explains that the old newspaper references had a "gritty vintage feel to them" and it was her way of depicting their faded, grainy quality.

The very small size of the canvases conveys a redolence of postcards from a bygone era. In viewing the exhibition we are invited to share West's fascination in the mores of glamour and style that characterised the optimism of the Post War decade.

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