Michelle Gay
OAKVILLE GALLERIES

"Interfaces and Operating Systems" the title of this exhibition – a survey of recent work by Michelle Gay, elegantly arranged by curator Marnie Fleming – may at first seem a reference to the digital technology present in most of the pieces. But such a coldly literal interpretation actually misses the point. The subject of a work like *timer (swat),* 2004, for example, is not computers, per se, but how we modern subjects interface with the world – the cultural systems by means of which we operate. A surprisingly intimate piece, the work features a collage-like digitally animated image of the artist displayed on

a desktop monitor hung on the wall. Her elongated legs move back and forth like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. While swaying, she repeatedly reaches upward to swat from her body, as if they were pesky insects, live digital readouts of the time, which then float away and fade into space. Three strands of hair extend vertically, like electrical wires, from her head, suggesting she is hooked up, perhaps painfully, to the regimented temporalities of conventional society.

For the installation *stretchpoem (promises)*, 2008-9, Gay again employs software this time to tackle the subject of language. A pressure sensitive touch pad located at the center of a darkened gallery allows audiences to activate projections of 3-D texts; they consist of assurances such as I PROMISE YOU A BETTER DAY WILL

COME or I PROMISE YOU I WILL NOT LET YOU DOWN. At first imperceptibly small, the statements inflate and rush toward the beholder, a juggernaut of clichés, suggesting the onslaught of talking points associated with politicians, preachers, or real estate developers. As one grows more adept at manipulating the touch pad, it becomes possible to slow the words' rapid movement; one feels as though one were actually touching and caressing these age-old platitudes of rhetorical persuasion. Here, the artist indicates a cautious belief in the significance of personal input, or even critique. Such restrained hopefulness is further revealed in *looploop*, 1999-2001, for which audiences don headphones playing atmospheric music and manipulate with a mouse text fragments displayed on a monitor. Sampled from diverse poetic sources, the phrases move in response to swirling mouse movements, conveying their content in ways that strike notes both arbitrary and profound. The exercise is a whimsical one, but the combinations that form never reach a fully satisfying level of coherence or expressiveness. Caught in the predetermined language of culture, one is left simply talking in circles.

The consequences of language's inadequacy is a means of expression as well as its misuse – in media contexts ranging from advertising to propaganda – are surreally and poetically addressed *in Ledger Drawings*, 2008-2009, two groups of sketches in graphite and gouache arranged as a pair of grids. Rendered on gridded sheets taken from a vintage ledger pad, these images feature subjects that are by turns playful and unsettling: stylized or fragmented bodies; curving or hazardous ladders; excitedly gesticulating or bent politicians. Like Gay's interactive pieces, the work demands a personally intuitive process of accounting, selecting, and summing-up of fragmented motifs and statements. At the same time, the renderings are executed so that they partly cover up the ledger papers' grids, suggesting a degree of resistance to contemporary culture's regimentation. Impressively adept at fusing new and retro technologies, Gay reminds us that through individual gestures we might manipulate the ideological messages that are constantly imposed on us, and in doing so, find room to breathe.
  - *Dan Adler*