Marilyn mania at the Glenbow

If you're a fan of everyone's favourite muse, this show's for you

Marilyn Monroe: Life as a Legend

Until February 22
Glenbow Museum

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If you have watched films or television, or listened to the music of Elton John, you have heard of Marilyn Monroe. Considered one of the greatest movie stars of all time, Monroe has been imitated and worshipped as a pop culture phenomenon since the height of her career in the mid-1950s. Born Norma Jeane Mortenson in 1926, she was discovered at a young age, modeled as a pin-up, dyed her hair blond and changed her name. In a handful of years, Norma Jeane grew to become the sensation that was Marilyn Monroe. She lived a glamorous but tragically short life, and Monroe still has an enormous number of fans whose devoted reverence hasn't waned a bit in the 46 years since her death.

Lucky for me, and countless other fans, the Glenbow Museum has just opened a Monroe exhibition, Marilyn Monroe: Life as a Legend. It is an impressive collection of visual art inspired by Monroe, or, more accurately, the German. The accompanying collection, Some Like It Haute: The Costumes of Marilyn Monroe, is a Canadian exclusive displaying costumes worn by the actresses, as well as photographs spanning her career. There are famous works of art and photos on display in this exhibition (Warhol anyone?), and the Glenbow does a good job honouring her. Some Like It Haute is both intriguing and melancholy. I love the censorship-defying sequined dress from Some Like It Hot EXPLAIN. Images of Monroe in each costume allow the garments to come to life. It’s amazing to visualize Monroe wearing the dresses, acting in them and sweating in them. The portraits surrounding the dresses encompass Monroe's life in front of the camera, starting with photos taken in her late teens, just after she was discovered. The series ends with photos of a tired, disheveled Monroe posing on a lawn chair in her final years.

In the Life as a Legend wing of the exhibition, I was immediately affected by the depth of the artwork. Although some of the Monroe-inspired pieces are sweet and celebratory, Sarah Schumann’s 1962 collage is dark and grieving. It depicts a seeping black cloud emerging from Monroe’s face, cradled in what looks like the heartland of America. The disquieting mood portrays Monroe’s controversial death and her enslavement to American icon status. Artist

Volker Hildebrandt's Marilyn Monroe Diamond is a large monochromatic acrylic painting, which only reveals Monroe in focus from a distance of four metres. Up close, Monroe’s face, done in thick, short paint strokes, is indistinguishable. Hildebrandt is reminding us that as much as we adore Monroe, we can only appreciate her from afar.

Peter Bach in his simple photograph of Marilyn Monroe taken at The Actor's Studio in 1956 is striking. It is surreal to view a simple snapshot of someone as polished and glamorous as Monroe, looking off at someone out of frame. Smiling and more relaxed than the public version of herself, she shows some very human lines and freckles. Just seeing this one candid photo of Monroe is worth a visit to the exhibition.

There is something undeniably affecting in the way Monroe has inspired the artists, photographers and designers whose work is on display at the Glenbow. She was just a woman, but one who still intrigues us.

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