

Opinion

Marder's State of America

By Jennifer Landes

(12/02/2008) At a time when a measured optimism pervades the country with the promise of change from the first African-American president, Silas Marder has mounted an exhibit that is a bracing internal examination of the national



Morgan McGivern

Post-Thanksgiving revelers contemplated "America" at the Silas Marder Gallery on Saturday night.

consciousness. The show offers its own signs of resiliency while warning of the perils of American myth.

Some of that tendency can be seen in the striking collage portraits of Frederick Douglass, Sitting Bull, Abraham Lincoln, and Susan B. Anthony by John Morse, composed with found bits of paper. Although the origins of the collages are humble — catalogs and cereal boxes — drawing attention to them by calling them "found" is a bit pretentious. By its very nature, collages are made with found paper whether it is of high or low origin.

Still, the use of lowly objects to portray grand figures evokes an immediacy and modesty by breaking the image apart and putting it together anew. The portraits are realistic enough to manifest the same iconic power familiar from previous encounters, but have a great expressionistic and painterly quality that belie their origins.

The first floor of the gallery has some familiar and new faces. Marc Burckhardt, a gallery regular, brings his peculiar take on early-American primitive painting styles to the portrait genre. Like characters in a Nathaniel Hawthorne novel, the figures are archetypical.

"The Elder," "The Heroine," and "Betrothal" each have odd elements that cause the viewer to pause and reassess what is being presented. The faux craqueleur that self-consciously implies age becomes an element of the composition, effectively breaking down the panels into shard-like fragments that still clearly communicate the whole.

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John Morse's collage portrait of Susan B. Anthony was made from bits of catalogues and cereal boxes.

- The women depicted in the portraits exhibit particularly strange symbolic manifestations. In "Betrothal," the subject is bound and gagged by her long braids, the crown jewel of her femininity, which also represent the bondage of marriage.

"Heroine," in comparison, is notably absent of hair, which has been replaced by a bizarre turban-like head scarf that also represents a bandage. She looks fashionably secure with her hat pinned askew on one side of her head, but the bandage-scarf still dominates any carefree jauntiness she might evince. The red heart bauble she

wears around her neck is an apparent substitute for the real thing.

The series plays with a number of tropes from the catalog of American traditions. The "Elder" is the patriarch, the god in whom we trust, or the father of our country; the "man" in all men created equal.

The "Heroine" is a female ideal, brought to perfection with modern eyeliner and lip gloss. The peacock feather in her jaunty hat is a signifier for stylish and sexual display, and represents the fine trimmings that are products of a successful capitalistic society. With capitalism in decline at the moment, it is a good time to take stock of what ideals come with it as personified in the traditional trappings here.



Marc Burckhardt's "Betrothal," an acrylic and oil painting on panel, uses faux craqueleur to mimic the aging process of old portraits.

In contrast to the feigned history of Mr. Burckhardt's paintings, the photograph of a Texas oil field by Edward Burtinsky is a document to real manifestations of contemporary capitalism's value system. In this case, the landscape is forsaken to promote a country's greed for fossil fuels. And while the destruction is obvious, there is a visual beauty in the patterns forced on the terrain by what appears to be an ordered and random exploration of the property.

A rogues' gallery of portraits of late-19th-century criminals by Joe Saunders reminds viewers of the less savory byproducts of any economy or society, but they are real characters in our own national story. With a focus

on the 1860s, these are people who were criminally active during a time of sacrifice and valor, providing a jaundiced contrast to the war heroes and dead who were accumulating on battlefields both North and South.

Oliver Peterson's "Birth of a Nation" incorporates imagery of a flag with collage, paint, and other compositional elements to form a messy and besmirched whole. The blood red of the flag's stripes mingles with other blobs and smears to imply both violence and nativity.

A large black star that dominates the right side of the composition appears ambivalent or multivalent. With the double meaning of the title, which touches on both the founding of the country and a documentary on the Ku Klux Klan, the star could signify a blight on the country's history or the indomitable will of an oppressed, disenfranchised, and targeted minority group to survive and overcome its past.

Upstairs, there are works by Alison Byrnes and Mica I. Marder. Ms. Byrnes's paintings have a naïve quality that conflates Roman emperors with American presidents.

Mr. Marder's turkey paintings are given a serial presentation that is reminiscent of Andy Warhol, but have an individuality that is also ennobling, even while they display a misshapen, improvisational quality. The sheer number of them brings to mind the ubiquitous flocks that have taken over the South Fork landscape, as well as a kind of symbolic manifestation of Thanksgiving celebrations past, present, and future.

The exhibit, at the Silas Marder Gallery in Bridgehampton, is on view through Jan. 12.