

Opinion

Winter of Discontent

By Jennifer Landes

(12/6/2007) Even the merriest reveler can occasionally be overcome by the holiday bah-humbugs. So if the selection of wreaths, ribbons, and paperwhites at Marders doesn't have you basking in that Christmas glow, you may want to stop in at the Silas Marder Gallery just down the driveway for a dose of moodier visual engagement.



"Leviathan" by Marc Burckhardt is part of a moody (even occasionally unnerving) holiday exhibit at the Silas Marder Gallery in Bridgehampton.

"Thanks Giving," a seasonally themed exhibit, is a bow to the artists and community that have supported the gallery over the past few years. It offers a darker, sometimes dysfunctional, sometimes dystopian, view of these months of family gatherings and holiday observations.

The most literal expression of these themes can be seen in the music video "Hurt" by Mark Romanek. It accompanies a performance by Johnny Cash of a Nine Inch Nails song. Mr. Cash is shown in his house playing the song and in old footage spanning his career. The video is cut throughout with scenes cast in a golden Dutch-still-life light that show the Man in Black at a table groaning under a feast; Mr. Cash pours out a glass of wine on the perfectly styled food, as his wife, June Carter Cash, nervously casts down her eyes.

The scenes are a perfect evocation of the kind of emotional bedlam that can take place within families at an ostensibly celebratory time, when custom and etiquette demand our best behavior.

Mr. Romanek is the director of a feature film, "One Hour Photo," and several music videos that, like this one, have received awards and a place in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Although "Hurt" might be familiar from other contexts, it is worth re-experiencing in the Marder video gallery for a more focused viewing.

The downstairs gallery is dominated by the work of Marc Burckhardt, an artist who has shown previously at Mr. Marder's gallery. The paintings here were all created in the past year, with a mixture of acrylic and oil on panel or paper. They have an old-world feel, which Mr. Burckhardt often accentuates with old-fashioned

frames nicked and dinged to simulate the patina of age.

Although the paintings are installed in a meaningful progression, it is easy to single out “Leviathan” both for its subject and its prominent placement on the wall opposite the entrance. In it, a gigantic whale dwarfs a small, primitively painted boy in the foreground. The small leash in the boy’s hand, which might have held a squirrel in an 18th-century portrait, appears to suggest that he either miraculously dragged the whale along with him or that the whale swallowed whatever pet that may have been at the opposite end. Like David, it appears that the small effete youth has conquered the beast, even though no clue is given as to how.

The Magritte-like placement of the whale in an incongruous landscape appears to signal a loss of innocence, or to herald evil (as the title also suggests). The placement of the beast between the boy and a happy house in the distance — there is a welcoming plume of smoke rising from the hearth — might portend the boy’s journey into the murkier world of manhood. Or, then again, sometimes a giant purple whale is just a giant purple whale. It works both ways.

The largest work in the show, “Leviathan” is also the most expensive, and that works, too. There is a gutsy quality about it heightened by its size and assigned worth. Although the leviathan in question does not resemble a sperm whale, the association with “Moby-Dick” adds another fun and twisted layer of possible meaning.

A similar exploration of traditional themes can be found in “Troy,” in which a horse with cut-off legs is left in a clearing on a bright red cart. Looking just as disproportionate and out of place as the whale, the horse looks like a toy discarded by the boy in the preceding picture, a toy that has developed a case of gigantism. This points out an inherent ridiculousness in the classical Greek story that always annoyed me when we had to take it seriously in school.

“Still Life” is a tiny tondo of even more round objects: a plate, a funky apple, and a shiny copper penny. A dead bird, possibly a goldfinch or canary, lies on its back with its feet in the air, perfectly placed but looking as if it dropped dead on the spot after pecking at the fetid fruit.

Both the faded grayness of the once-vivid yellow plumage and the smoke emanating from the candle’s wick favor the “still” over the “life” in this painting. This is a more direct approach to the subject of death, which is usually more delicately suggested in the genre.

Other artists in the show express a more generalized December unease about the state of the world and the humans in it. There are Tomory Dodge’s melting icebergs, which need no explanation, Camille Rose Garcia’s Disney-inspired nightmarish underworlds, and Diane Giardi’s ceramic biomorphic forms that telegraph disease, blockage, and other forms of collapse or failure.

The selection of oil and enamel paintings on board by Laura Madera, a Canadian artist, are all landscapes of a sort, maybe best described as exteriors. The cold, snow-filled environments she depicts make her buildings seem much more desirable and unattainable, forcing her viewers into a place on the outside looking in, whether that place is outside a house, a skating rink, or a parked car.

She has painted an impenetrable fence directly in front of one house, for example, that would otherwise be close enough to approach. This not only discourages entry to the house, but also to the painting itself.

The paired windows, darkened like soulless eyes, add another layer of foreboding.

The exhibit is on view through Dec. 23.