

'Four Painters' [] 'Four Walls'

Fredric Koepfel, Special to The Commercial Appeal 2 p.m. CDT October 18, 2016



(Photo: Courtesy of the artist)

The exhibition “Four Painters [] Four Walls” at Circuitous Succession Gallery offers lessons in contrast and technique, attitude and vision. On view through Nov. 22, the work by Juan Rojo, Christopher St. John, Jason Stout and Robert Moler, while vastly divergent, tends toward mythologizing stances that elevate their subjects through styles and codes that are as disturbing as they are impressive. None of these artists deals in abstraction; each is highly expressionistic, even artificial in the sense of extreme artifice. A sort of mannerism is at play.

The most explicit in the realm of mythologizing is St. John. His four oil-on-wood pieces here involve variations and transformations — there is no myth without metamorphosis — on the subject of Icarus, the youth who ascended on man-made wings too close to the sun whose heat melted the wax that held them together. Icarus, for his heedless aspiration, fell to Earth and was killed. St. John is the loosest of this quartet of artists, his manner with pigment dense, impulsive, brushy. Against variegated white backgrounds, like the blank walls of dreams, he posits grotesque figures with swollen limbs, misshapen heads and bulging bellies. In “Icarus Transformed 3,” the boy’s wings have moved from his shoulders and taken the shape of a portentous bird that

perches on his head, its span outreaching the edges of the picture. The feeling is intense, prophetic and foreboding.

Completely different in almost every way from St. John’s paintings are the nine pieces in the “Latin” series from Robert Moler. Rendered with meticulous fineness of detail and painstaking minutiae, they are worthy of the great illusionistic artists of the Dutch Renaissance or the 19th century French academy. Moler’s subjects, though, are profane and provocative. Each piece carries a Latin tag, often lettered on a strip of ribbon, that explicitly summarizes the artist’s themes of loss, decay and dissolution, of the vanity of human wishes and the transitory nature of beauty. We are fools, he asserts, to base our happiness on mutability. Moler employs time-burnished symbols like fading flowers, clocks, skulls, hummingbirds, tinkling bells to convey an old message, but he makes it new and comic through the images of male torsos whose exaggerated and gleaming musculature hint at a homoerotic undertone of bondage and sadomasochism.

That current links Moler’s work to the eight acrylic-and-pencil pieces by Rojo, who continues in a vein of subversive wedding iconography that blends sickly lavender and Pepto-Bismol hues and richly decorative effects with brides bound, blindfolded and otherwise restrained, their faces expressing apprehension and fear. Rojo seems to have tapped into a hidden and disturbing strain of feeling about the fraught relationships between men and women, about marriage, the “ties that bind,” the implications of that promise “I do.” At the top of one piece that depicts a woman swathed in pink, kneeling on a black-and-white checkerboard floor, her hands tied behind her, the artist writes in gold cursive, “Will you be my.” We hesitate to ask what purpose or accommodation is being asked.

Finally, we come to the bright, raucous, carnivalesque oil-on-canvas paintings of Jason Stout. There are four in this exhibition, and they radiate a rude but fastidious comic book dynamism and verve. Stout works in a similar structure in every one of his paintings that I have seen, basically an explosion of pop culture and newsworthy forms and figures that occupies the center and hovers above a storybook landscape blasted and polluted — in this exhibition — by oil rigs and fracking. Stout is, in other words, a critic and satirist who harnesses violence and rage in a manner both benign and belligerent. The results are works colorful and cartoonish enough to be hung in a child’s bedroom, though you would want it to be a highly intelligent child whose questions you could answer willingly, like “Why does this painting have all these funny knives and bombs?”

'Four Painters' [] 'Four Walls'

Through Nov. 22 at Circuitous Succession Gallery. 500 S. Second. Call 901-229-1041 or visit circuitoussuccession.com (<http://circuitoussuccession.com>).

