

Psyche and Paint: Exhibitions by Katie Musolff and Rafael Francisco Salas

Posted By [Kat Murrell](#) On September 17, 2009 @ 3:12 am In [Arts & Culture](#), [VITAL](#), [Visual Art](#) | [1 Comment](#)



[1]

Singer Shane MacGowan of The Pogues in Rafael Francisco Salas' Untitled.

What do people look like? They've got brown/black/red hair. They see with brown/blue/green eyes, maybe they've got exceptional features like a Jay Leno chin or Angelina Jolie permanently pursed lips. But any entrancing picture of a person goes beyond the catalog of physical features and tells you something about intangible qualities — what is the character of this person, and what does the image make you feel like? It's no secret that part of human nature is a deep-seated interest in watching other people — hence the success of "Reality TV." People-watching on the street, or wherever, is like a spontaneous spectacle of life, kind of like an improv show. But portrait painting is a planned, directed spectacle, more akin to a theatrical production.

Katie Musolff: Artist and Model



[2]

Katie Musolff, Chris Jackson in the Studio, 2009, on view at the Charles Allis Art Museum.

Milwaukee-native Katie Musolff is the artist featured in the current solo exhibition at the Charles Allis Art Museum. The show goes by the name "Artist and Model," which is entirely apt. The flow of paintings does its best to take on the difficult space of the Charles Allis, as pictures ramble throughout the museum, from the Great Hall to the upstairs bedrooms in this early-twentieth-century mansion. Four major themes give some curatorial cohesion to the display: The St. Ann Series, Self Portraits, Nudes and Family/Friends.

Musolff comes across as an exceptionally personable painter. She wrote the essay in the gallery guide and the wall text in the

show, and this is wall text worth reading. Musolff is by turns confessional and instructive. She takes the viewer on a gallery tour akin to "Inside the Artist's Studio." She talks about the models she paints, the camaraderie and situations of working in the studio and with a model posed in a bathtub. Her work is guided by an openness and interest in her subjects; they're down to earth and poised, thoughtful and untroubled. Her painting technique is at ease and direct.

Musolff's subjects occupy familiar environments, and backgrounds in her pictures are like good conversationalists in the amount of detail they give, telling of rooms, plants and window views. The colors on the canvases play off each other buoyantly in broad patches and slashes. There's a lovely word, *tache*, which comes from the French, and refers to all manners of painting marks that could be described as a spot, smirch, blotch, patch of paint. You get the idea, but you actually have to get close to get it. Your eyes let go of looking at arms as arms, knees as knees, and they dissolve into a surface that basks in colorful effects of light and shadow. Musolff seems not only to delight in her subjects, but also in a color palette of uplifting tones.

Of course, Musolff isn't the only painter to employ this technique, the visible strokes of the brush and patches of unblended colors are part and parcel of all painters' work. But, like handwriting, the hand of each artist has different things to say through each *tache* of pigment on surface.

Rafael Francisco Salas at Portrait Society



[3]

Rafael Francisco Salas, *Untitled*, 2009 on view at Portrait Society Gallery.

The main gallery at Portrait Society is a diminutive, intimate space, and an interesting setting for large paintings. The current solo exhibition featuring Rafael Francisco Salas is justly dominated by his *Untitled* triptych, just completed this summer.

Salas is a painter who, like Musolff, often veers toward representational works — we see people, places, things. There is also plenty of variation in his brushwork and surface colors, but the underlying tone and character of the work of these two artists are far apart. Whereas Musolff's paintings are dedicated to down-to-earth appreciation, Salas delves into realms of otherworldly, psychic intensity.

The *Untitled* triptych (a triptych is simply a painting made up of three separate panels), is a portrait of sorts. At the left, the Southern writer Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) sits reservedly with arms crossed, and on the right Shane MacGowan (b. 1957), the singer of the Irish/English punk band, The Pogues, is like a vision of now meeting the hereafter; his head in motion or exploding. The painting is rife with symmetries and oddities, a tense terrain of creation and destruction. The primary elements are two people, apart in time and space, as an amorphous cloud of paint obscures and separates, but a spread-out still life of empty beers and liquor bottles draws the three panels together. Who favors the Heineken, and who the Miller?

This painting is a summation of some studies and portraits in the gallery, but not all pieces in the show are overtly related. Art historical shadows creep in, as [Salas' *The Young Girl and the Dog*](#) [4] brings to mind flickering references to [Francisco Goya's *The Dog*](#) [5]. [Grant Wood's *Woman With Plant\(s\) of 1929*](#) [6], an Americana take-off on the [Mona Lisa](#) [7], seems further refracted in Salas' [Dusk #1](#). His scraped and scarred figures, with human attributes seeping through animal heads as in [The Sons of Adam #2](#) [8], are like the angst-ridden conceptions of [Francis Bacon](#) [9]. These earlier connections notwithstanding, Salas imbues his paintings with his own unique and distinctively dark, unsettled sensibilities. Tense, but alluring, like a siren's song.

Paintings appeal to a variety of moods, tastes and even purposes. The details of what a person, place or thing look like are merely starting points, just suggestions. The endless fascination of painting happens after the first steps are taken from that starting point. There are many paths to choose, including the invitations from the directions of Musolff's physical interests and Salas's psychological intensity.

Katie Musolff: Artist and Model

Closes November 8

[Charles Allis Art Museum](#) [10]

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Rafael Francisco Salas

Closes October 30

[Portrait Society Gallery](#) [11]

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[4] Salas' *The Young Girl and the Dog* : <http://portraitsocietygallery.wordpress.com/2009/08/29/rafael-francisco-salas/the-young-girl-and-the-dog/>

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[8] The Sons of Adam #2: <http://portraitsocietygallery.wordpress.com/2009/08/29/rafael-francisco-salas/the-sons-of-adam-2-2/>

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