

Art City

Dynamic dichotomies

Salas mixes old and new imagery at portrait gallery

Artist Rafael Francisco Salas has been in a long, slow swoon with portraiture for years.

He loves the face-to-face recognition between the viewer and sitter, a universal connection and inescapable point of departure, he says. And the skin, the quality of flesh.



Mary Louise Schumacher

Salas is one of the best painters working in Wisconsin today.

He fell for Rembrandt's meaty self-portrait. And there were the portraits by American folk artists — strikingly modern works made with the simple deliberateness of a snapshot. And once, he lost himself in the fine collars of Persian royals in Dutch-influenced portraits.

As for contemporaries, he is fond of John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, Odd

Nertum and others who employ the iconography and traditional forms of art history while carving out a conceptual basis that takes on the contemporary world, too.

His own attempt at this duality seems to have taken root since his return to the rural landscape of Wisconsin in 2006.

Salas, now an assistant professor of painting and drawing at Ripon College, left Wisconsin after graduating from Ripon High School and returned 15 years later to work on his mother's sheep farm. In his years away, he studied art and lived in places such as Minneapolis, London, New Mexico and especially New York.

"I was out of work . . . and there was a reason to come home," he says, generally eschewing personal details when talking about his art.

Salas is one of the best painters working in Wisconsin today and has shown widely around the region, particularly in the last year and a half. A show of new work is on view at the Portrait Society Gallery.

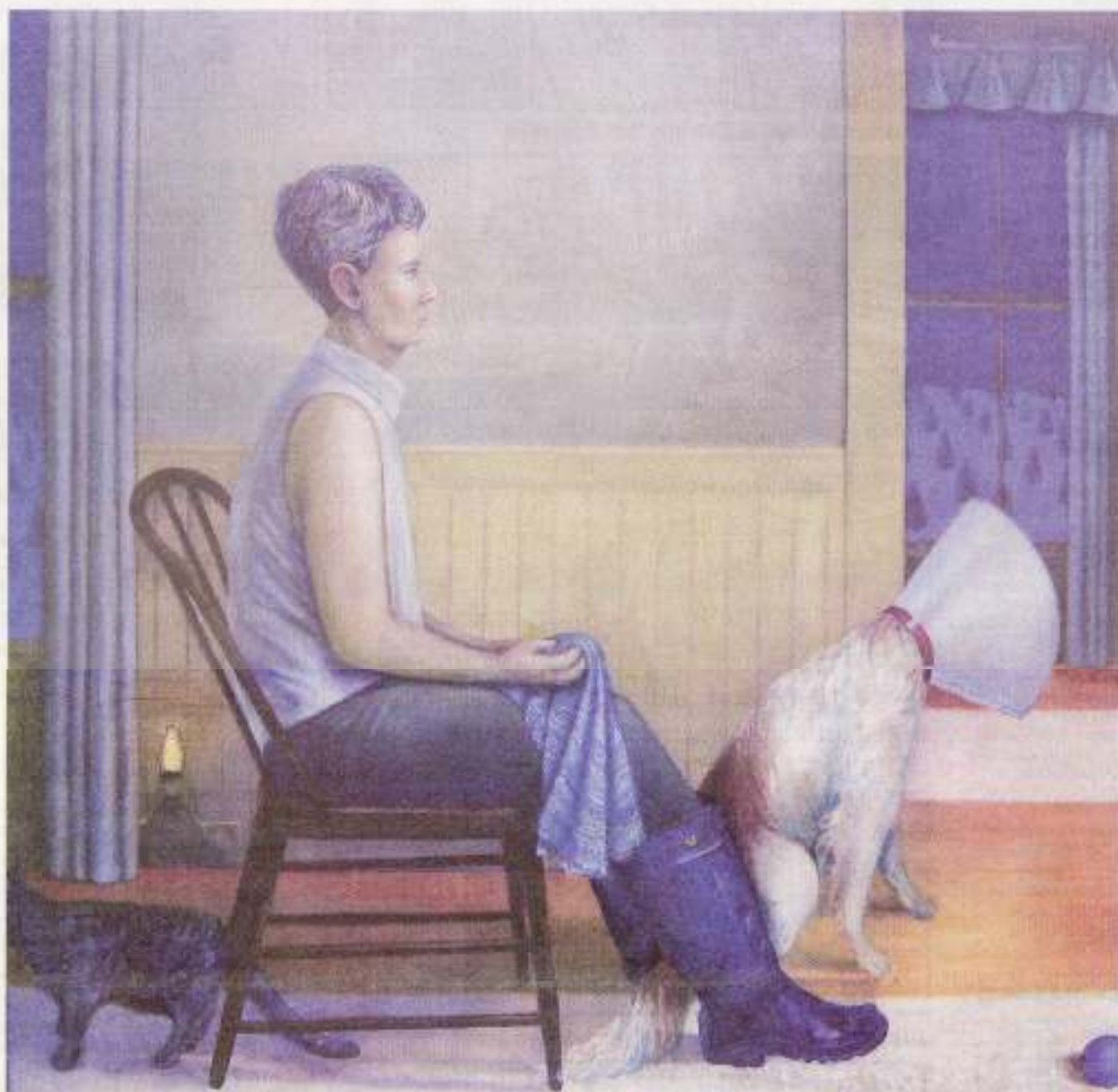
Some of his best work bears a striking resemblance to the personal form of surrealism practiced by a clique of regional artists known as the magic realists.

"I was not aware of those painters at all," he said of postwar-era artists such as John Wilde. "But when I saw it I could absolutely attach myself to it."

One of the first paintings Salas made after returning was a portrait of his mother, a flipping around and gutsy reinterpretation of the iconic American work, popularly known as "Whistler's Mother" by James McNeill Whistler.

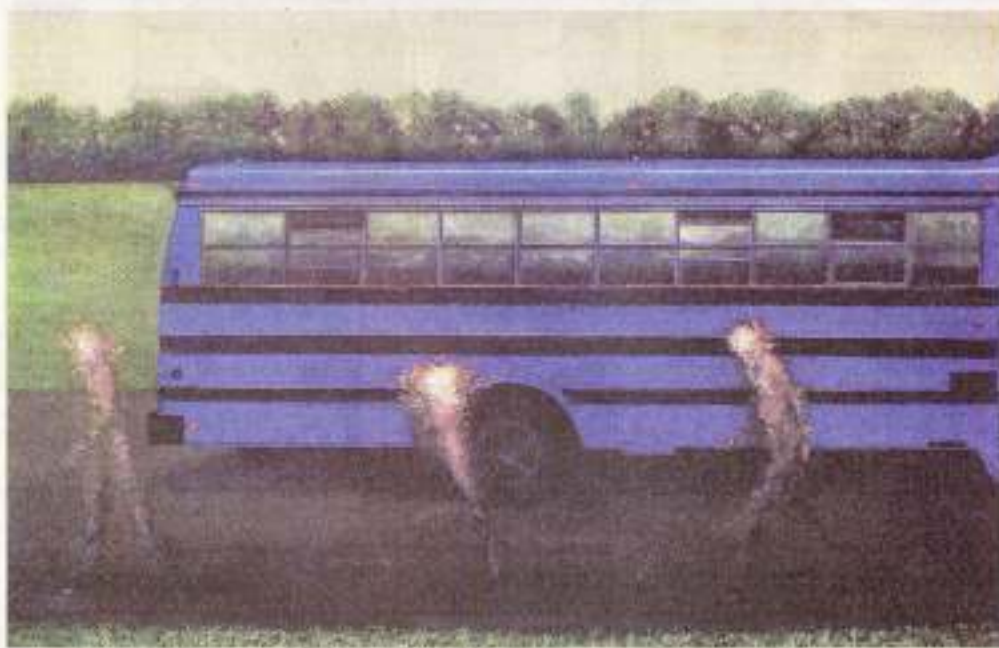
Whistler's original, first titled "Arrangement in Grey and Black" was intended to be just that, an arrangement, about formal composition. In spite of that, it remains known for its severe psychology.

Salas plays with this stilted dichotomy beautifully. He created an exacting image of his mother imbued with a sense of void and voice-



COURTESY OF RAFAEL FRANCISCO SALAS

Rafael Francisco Salas' "Winter Portrait" is a gutsy reinterpretation of the iconic American work known as "Whistler's Mother."



IF YOU GO

What: New work by Rafael Francisco Salas

When: Through Oct. 30

Where: Portrait Society Gallery, 207 E. Buffalo St.

Hours: 1 to 4 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

Information: (414) 870-9930 or visit www.portraitsocietygallery.wordpress.com

Three figures seem to disassemble into dots of light and color in Salas' untitled painting of a blue migrant bus.

lessness, though he leavens it with a touch of humor. The unnatural geometry of a Christmas tree farm, seen through the window, adds to the sense of detached "arrangement."

Another work, an untitled painting of a bright blue bus, is very much about the narrative of migrant work in Salas' family. Used

and repainted school buses are a common sight in rural Wisconsin, where they're used to transport workers to jobs.

In the painting, three figures seem to disassemble into dots of light and color, an infusion of loose abstraction in an otherwise realist painting. The metaphor for the faceless, replaceable worker and

the untouchable mythology of that life, is evident.

One of Salas' most ambitious and newest paintings is the centerpiece of the show. In it, two truculent artists are seated at the far ends of a sofa, as if retreating from a bad party.



This triptych by Rafael Francisco Salas features Flannery O'Connor (left) and Shane MacGowan.

COURTESY OF RAFAEL FRANCISCO SALAS

From page 1

SALAS

Focus is on dichotomies

Flannery O'Connor, the Southern Gothic writer, sits in the left panel of the three-panel triptych. Her gaze is fixed and taut. Her folded fingers and arms indicate unease.

In the right panel is Shane MacGowan, the literate but disastrously alcoholic frontman for the '80s punk band the Pogues. His visage, by contrast, is a blur of violent sensation, refracted and

dissipating, in turns, not unlike the open-mouthed figures of Francis Bacon.

What is it about these two—both brutal realists, in their own ways, and Catholics?

O'Connor and MacGowan are inserted where we'd normally find kneeling art patrons in this archetypal form, typical of early Christian altar paintings. But what timeless mystery do they sit in attendance to?

We find a hint tacked to the tacky wood-paneled wall at the center of the painting, where we might expect an Annunciation or Nativity scene. It is a folk artwork depicting a cat devouring a peacock—an ancient symbol of immortality, a Renaissance symbol for eternal life

and a favorite conceit of O'Connor's.

Emanating from the center of the work is another eruption of abstraction and an additional hint. Collections of daubs of paint taken from the painting's overall palette sit flat on the panel. They anatomize the painting—its depicted space, its secret recipes.

It strikes me as a painting about the mystery of paint itself—but also the solitariness of a certain kind of artist. It might be too simple to say it's a stand-in of sorts for the artist himself. Though perhaps not.

Salas' show at the Portrait Society Gallery, 207 E. Buffalo St., closes Oct. 30. For details, call (414) 870-9930.

