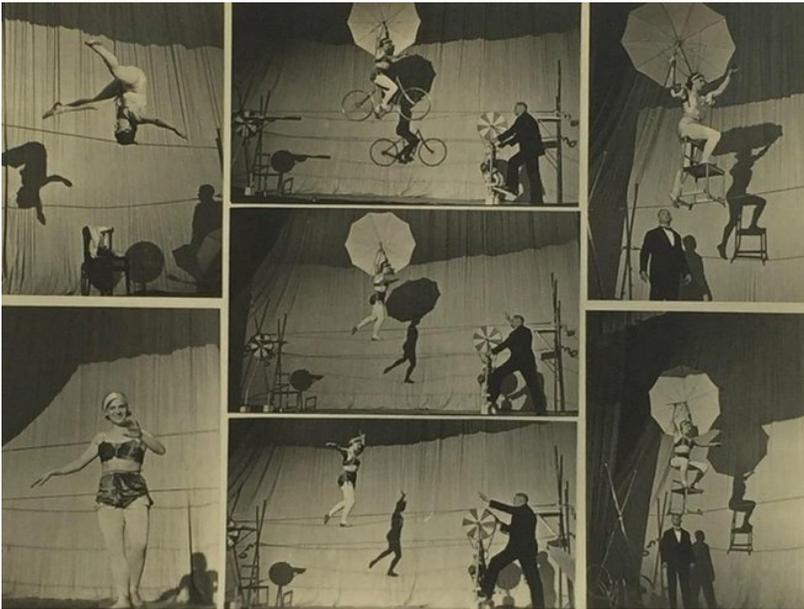


Humble and auspicious, Irish painter Fergus Feehily is inaugural show at The Suburban

By Rafael Francisco Salas, Art City Contributor | Oct. 15, 2015



Feehily's show boils down to six humble works. Some might need to petition to be called paintings at all, but they address and usher in the more formal gallery setting for The Suburban in Milwaukee.

Riverwest has achieved art star status. The Suburban has opened. Its inaugural exhibit features Irish painter Fergus Feehily, whose work acknowledges and even heightens the importance of the new space itself, a humbling thing for a painter to do.

Though at times frustrating, the show also highlights the importance of what curators and owners Michelle Grabner and Brad Killam are working for with their new digs in Milwaukee.

Rafael Francisco Salas | Fergus Feehily

Not that Grabner | Killam are new to town. They both have roots in Milwaukee and the opening of The Suburban in Riverwest is an homage to their return. Until now, The Suburban was an intentionally tiny exhibition space in Oak Park, Illinois that became one of the eminent art locales in the Chicago area. Iconic artists like Matthew Barney and Bjork chose The Suburban for their creative projects over more obvious choices. It is the innovative, non-commercial and artist-centered approach that has brought great artists to The Suburban. In this way, it has the potential to be one of the most influential spaces to inhabit Milwaukee, if not the Midwest.



Rafael Francisco Salas
 Fergus Feehily

Feehily's show boils down to six humble works. Some might need to petition to be called paintings, but all relate to and complement the gallery, and with some patience, evoke the nature of painting if not the fact of it.

As I wandered the spare space I saw a rectangular piece of pink insulation drilled into the wall about two feet off the ground. An errant tuft floated off the top of it with screws irregularly securing it to the wall. At maybe a foot at its longest edge, it is minimal, mostly a found object. But it is an object elevated, at least to my knees. As I bent down and pondered it, I felt that Feehily was using the everyday nature of this pink rectangle to talk about the miraculous color that surrounds us at all turns and to discuss the very fabric with which The Suburban is built. Imperfections in the surface emerge, pinpricks and perhaps an intentional smudge of red that the artist painted on the surface, bearing the trace of the hand in its composition.

Other works include a circle of white plastic, wrinkled into reflective facets and nailed to the wall. On the floor are two pieces of reclaimed white muslin, their original sewn edges still evident, laid out in a rough rectangle. Two different shades of white were reflecting edges of light from the windows facing the street. Bits of busted glass and dust had begun to gather on the surface. The light refracted on the fabric created a dynamic composition as light and shade played across it.

Honestly, at this point, I was feeling a little cheated. The artwork is diminutive and left me forlorn. Again, hung low, there was a framed postcard of female tightrope walkers holding umbrellas and riding bicycles on tenuous wires. I was kneeling, trying to come to grips with this outlying image, when I realized I was looking at the narrative key to the exhibit. There are no labels, no wall text and no title to the show. But in this darkened corner, poking my nose at this weirdly hung photograph, I understood Feehily's vision much more. It is the tightrope. He is asking us to consider



Rafael Francisco Salas
 Fergus Feehily



Rafael Francisco Salas
Fergus Feehily

when a painting ends and where the world begins. What is the difference between a gallery wall and the artwork in the gallery? The edge of these definitions is a tightrope and Feehily is riding it like a carny. All the works in the gallery balance between burgeoning into art and complete dissolution and don't quite fall into either category. Everything balances on the liminal space between.

There are two veritable paintings in the show. One is a nearly completed field of silver-gray, with a white rectangle mysteriously left in the bottom right corner. The painting rests between utilitarian gray doors on either side, composing themselves in relation to the painting.

There is also a dense, layered work that is pink, yellow, amber and pink again. It is painted on the wrong side of a piece of Masonite and framed in an alarming safety yellow, or green, or some variation. The frame reflects onto the gallery walls, lighting them up like ambulance sirens.

Feehily's work was exhibited in 2013 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in a group show discussing the nature of contemporary abstract painting. It was called "Painter Painter." For me, this title is an invocation, and I kept repeating it as I walked out onto the street. As I spoke the words, I was confused as to whether I was talking to Feehily as a painter himself, or trying to draw a painter from his work like an incantatory prayer. I imagine he is fine with it either way.

The Suburban is at 2901 N. Fratney. The show is up through Nov. 1. Gallery hours are Saturdays from noon to 5 p.m.

Rafael Francisco Salas is a painter, a professor of art at Ripon College and a regular Art City contributor. He recently participated in an "Art City Asks" with fellow contributor Karin Wolf.