

With incredible skill, Fred Stonehouse embraces the weird

By Rafael Francisco Salas, Special to the Journal Sentinel | Dec. 4, 2015



Courtesy Museum of Wisconsin Art | Fred Stonehouse's "Back Wall."

If one were to walk around Coney Island wearing a rubber mask and a rosary while reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez and falling in (or out) of love, it might approximate the experience of looking at Fred Stonehouse's paintings. They are bedeviled and full of old, deep magic. They cipher the dream world and hold an imaginative force that is acute.

The title of Stonehouse's retrospective at the Museum of Wisconsin Art, "The Promise of Distant Things," describes the mystery of viewing these paintings perfectly. We can't comprehend everything the artist conjures, but he is assuring us that this knowledge isn't that far away, is perhaps tucked away in some bizarre nook of the work.

The works speak in many languages and contain phrases in English, Spanish, German and Latin that lead the viewer to connect content to otherwise inscrutable characters, or alternately work as red herrings, leading us mysteriously away. They are populated by truncated figures, animals, devils and symbolic voices.

They are also gems of craft. They utilize figurative mastery, expressionist echoes and pop references that combine into truly unique objects. They evoke paintings from the Northern Renaissance, folk art traditions, the Chicago Imagists, lowbrow artists and grubby carnivals. Similarly, Stonehouse connects to the Magical Realist painters of an earlier generation in Wisconsin, including John Wilde.

His connection to the Old Masters runs deep, and the gravity he achieves with this skill is considerable. Astonishingly, his works are made with acrylic paint, a 20th-century medium, but they have the layered, hard-candy feel of antique oil.

I was not surprised when I learned that Stonehouse comes from a Catholic background in Milwaukee. The paintings are full of binary models of good and evil and exploit the emotions and imagery of Christian iconography. We feel the authoritative grief of Christ as the Man of Sorrows, but in the artist's vision it is the red-rimmed eyes of a stag in the forest, shedding huge droplets down his face. A sign in his mouth in red lettering reads "LOST."



Courtesy Museum of Wisconsin Art
Fred Stonehouse's "Marsh Buck."

Loss and absence seem to be a major component in Stonehouse's visual vocabulary. His characters cavort and cry in a world where they often walk alone. A figure with coal black face, crying eyes and stunted horns whispers, "How Much I Have Lost." A dreary friar, also with black appendages on his head, hoists a pillowcase with his belongings over his shoulder and walks through cartoonish precipitation. It is titled "Already Gone."



Jim Escalante

Fred Stonehouse's "The Promise of Distant Things."

I mentioned the carnival in regards to this exhibit and indeed unshaven carnies and circus freaks abound. Stonehouse has also included attractions. "The Short Ride Home" shows a red devil riding a weird donkey's back, but the faces are cut away. Viewers can poke their heads through, have their photos taken, and "Step into a Stonehouse." It is hilarious. Stonehouse includes a portable tattoo parlor complete with working gun, flash art and rules posted — "No Refunds, No Drunks."

There is a dichotomy between humor and horror in the paintings. The viewer moves between a deep empathy for the maimed and suffering losers in these works and a fascination for their grotesquerie. Stonehouse's world does mirror ours after all, and those connections are vivid. He reminds us from where his dream world was born. "The Ghost of Horicon" and "Fond du Lac Lady" are all a part of the Stonehouse cast list.

Stonehouse continues his self-deprecating humor in writing. The catalog for this exhibit, free to download from the MOWA website, includes a statement from the artist. In ballsy contrast to artists who use justification through jargon or other dreary documentation, Stonehouse instead makes a list of all of the injuries he has had in his life. This includes punching a bully's face through a window and the ensuing lacerations from broken glass, crashing his motorcycle five times and being pinned beneath a falling tree branch. The essay is called "Accident Prone" and is perhaps the most fitting and engaging statement by an artist that I have read.

The exhibit at MOWA is curated sensitively and doesn't attempt to include too much work, which is hard to do considering Stonehouse's prolific career. Graeme Reid, director of exhibitions, has selected works from 1990 to the present, showcasing tiny, precious drawings and grand statements. Prepare for the weird.

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