

Tom Berenz' broken memories at Thelma

By Rafael Francisco Salas | March 11, 2016



Tom Berenz, "Lady Above the Garden."



Tom Berenz, "Three Feet Under."

Memory becomes fragmentary in time. As the past moves into the distance, memories become less distinct, reduced at times to images, colors or scents that evoke mnemonic awakenings. This is the creative realm where Tom Berenz works.

Tom Berenz' recent exhibit at the Thelma Sadoff Center for the Arts in Fond du Lac was a small grouping of wonderful, at times poignant, paintings.

He calls his subjects "piles," and indeed they are a mash-up of broken memories, an array of trendy painting gestures, heaps of forlorn junk and pop-culture references. "Lady Above the Garden" shows a cartoonish elderly woman broken to bits as if viewed while driving swiftly past cracked glass. She could be a lawn ornament. Her shards combine with gingham and leafy green projections, seemingly lit from above by an orange sun and a cloud doubling as a raw egg.

There is dripping paint, hard edged abstractions and realist gestures forced into a hot, jumbled mess. It reminded me of a blurry summer afternoon from long ago. There were strawberries, a garden and a figure whose face I've since forgotten.

This is not to say that the paintings rely on sentiment. They are an awful lot of fun, even if the subject matter is dark. The exhibit's titular painting shows wild, extended limbs flailing under water. It recalls a near drowning experience and the viewer can see useless water wings, perhaps a life preserver and splayed hands absently chopping and splashing. I am reminded of the bitter humor of contemporary painter Dana Schutz and the cartoonish angst of Wisconsin artist T.L. Solien simultaneously.

Berenz is quickly becoming one of Wisconsin's most distinctive emerging painters. I look forward to his deepening excavations of memory reconstructed in paint.

"Tom Berenz: Three Feet Under" was on view at the Thelma Sadoff Center for the Arts in Fond du Lac through last week. "Tom Berenz: Towards the North" will open at the James Watrous Gallery, 201 State St. in Madison on March 18 and be on view through May 8 alongside a solo exhibit by Shane Macadams.

Rafael Francisco Salas and Tom Berenz worked together for a time at Ripon College. Salas is a painter, a professor of art at Ripon College and a regular Art City contributor.