

Sunday, January 1, 2017 **Milwaukee Journal Sentinel**

TAP

Books: Exploring how we talk. **6E**

R.S.V.P.: Tea for Life a multigenerational event. **7E**

Day Out: Winter festivals across Wisconsin. **10E**

E Read more entertainment news and features at tapmilwaukee.com

Salas finds tension in depictions of rural life

DIANE M. BACHA

ART CITY CONTRIBUTOR

In his second exhibit at the Latino Arts Gallery, Rafael Francisco Salas continues his wistful conversation with aspiration, illusion and identity in rural Wisconsin, updating it to our year of national argument.

"Pastoral Testimony" revisits artifacts and settings Salas has worked with before: lawn ornaments and farmyard props, streetscapes and landscapes, domestic interiors and small-town bars.

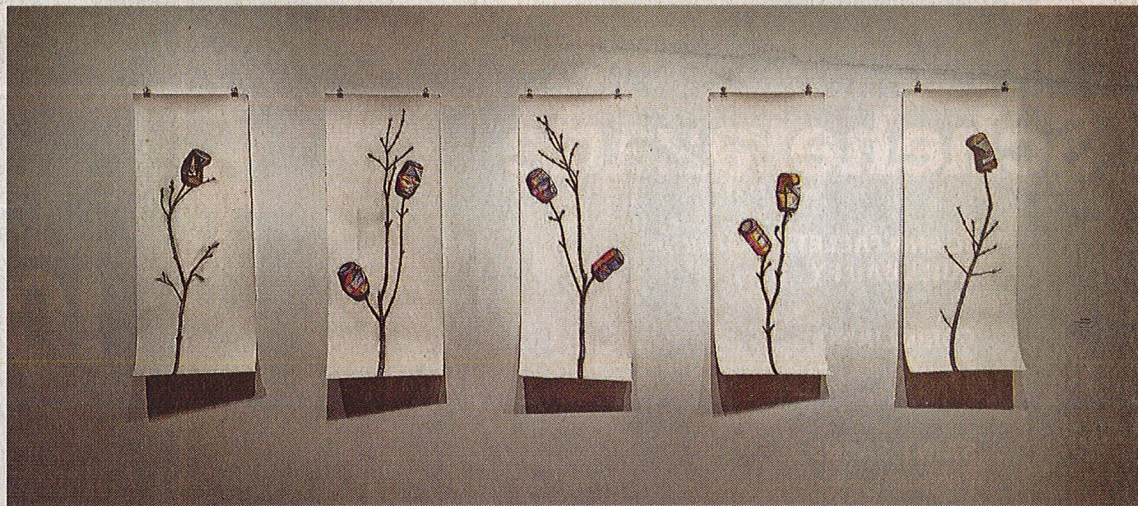
It's a vocabulary familiar to anyone who has taken a country drive. But because Salas brings a native's knowledge to it, we're

spared the irony that might result in an outsider's hands. So the swan-shaped planters in "Territory (Tierra)," a large-scale charcoal drawing, and the legless, floating flamingos in his mixed-media "Pastoral Testimony (Flamingos)" can't be so quickly observed.

Neither can the tension between things: the natural and the man-made, the banal and beautiful, what's real and what's an aspiration.

Salas was born in Milwaukee and raised in rural Wisconsin. He spent some of his early years north of Wautoma, where his grandfather had a Mexican res-

See SALAS, Page 4E



Rafael Francisco Salas' "Longing," a set of charcoal and acrylic drawings, is part of the exhibit at Latino Arts Gallery.

DIANE M. BACHA



LATINO ARTS GALLERY

Rafael Francisco Salas' "Watching Jolene, 1:00 a.m." (2016), raises the question of what's a TV show and what's real. The Latino Arts Gallery exhibit continues through Feb. 23.

Salas

Continued from Page 1E

taurant. After graduating from Ripon High School, he left to study art in St. Paul and New York City, and in so doing traveled the world. He returned 15 years later, spent some time working on his mother's sheep farm, and stayed. Since 2006, he has been an associate professor of art at Ripon College, and has exhibited widely. (He's also a frequent Art City contributor).

Which is to say that Salas sees the rural upper-Midwest through the eyes of someone who knows it well, who has friends and family there, but who has also gone far enough afield to gain perspective. This gives him an intimate point of view about a community most of us know only through clichés. That view, quietly powerful, lets us consider it in more nuanced ways.

In a series of new drawings, Salas isolates common elements of rural domestic life and gives them a nobility I found both touching and sad. This is where the swans and flamingos come in, but another good example is "Longing," five gracefully rendered charcoal-and-acrylic drawings, in which crushed and empty beer cans balance on a series of leafless branches. They could almost be buds about to bloom in spring, or trash carelessly tossed out.

In "Territory (Tierra),"

swan planters flank an arbor and an American flag waving gently on a pole in the near-distance. It stands as an assertion of both identity and belief, but there's a hint of loneliness and darkness, too. This is the largest piece in the room, and the touchstone. Salas says that, as he created this work, he was conscious of the national election drama — one that threw the rural-urban divide into high relief. It's respectful, it's fraught, and it serves as context for the show.

On the opposite wall are earlier oil paintings that evoke small-town night life, and that I keep thinking about. In particular, "Sun (Shine) (World Without End)" captures a many-layered moment that confuses at first glance. Neon beer signs and light bouncing off bottles orient us as we realize we're in a crowded bar, standing behind other customers. It's dark, boozy, indistinct and beautiful. You can smell the beer and hear the murmurs.

Along with "Two Suns Bright," which could be the exterior of the same bar, there's an unsettling sense of isolation mingling with community. The interior scene is crowded but anonymous. The exterior scene is Hopper-esque in its play of artificial light — standing in for the sun — against a building whose windows are dark.

Salas says about his current work, "Country music is the appropriate soundtrack." I'm choosing to take this as a caution against too much melancholy.

Case in point: "Watching Jolene, 1:00 a.m.," an installation that adds the same wry humor a country song can bring to a sad tale. A chair upholstered in blue, brown and rust-colored flowers (I know I've seen that pattern before) sits in front of a canvas that's just the size of a flat-screen TV. On it, Salas has painted a scene from a 1970s video of Dolly Parton performing her plaintive song that pleads with a woman not to steal her man.

As he often does, Salas interrupts the realism of his painting with spots of abstraction. This time the spots are pixelated squares of color along with patches of that same floral upholstery pattern. A few empty beer cans are scattered about. You're invited to sit in the chair and stare at the canvas/TV screen if you like.

Is this about a sleepy, beer-soaked state of confusion, or about our confusion over what's a TV show and what's real life? It doesn't really matter. Dolly may be a big star on a sound stage, but she's singing about troubles we've had, too.

Given the year we've had, "Pastoral Testimony" has some insights we could learn from.

"Pastoral Testimony" is on view through Feb. 23 at the Latino Arts Gallery in the United Community Center, 1028 S. 9th St. For details visit www.latinoartsinc.org.

Diane M. Bacha is editorial director at Kalmbach Publishing Co. and a former arts editor.