

Art City Asks: Rafael Francisco Salas

By Karin Wolf, Art City Contributor
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Rafael Francisco Salas's work seemed to be everywhere I went in recent months.

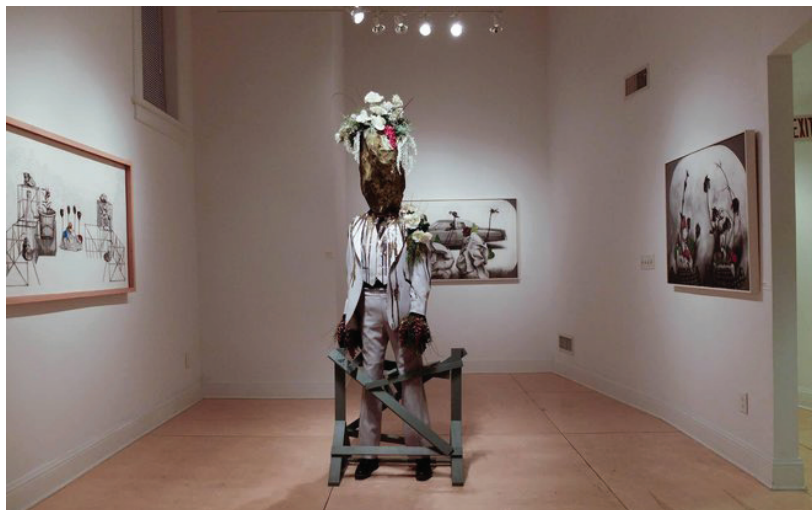
A prolific Wisconsin artist, associate professor of art at Ripon College and fellow Art City contributor, Salas had correlating shows open in Milwaukee in March, one at the Portrait Society and one at Walker's Point Center for the Arts. By May he was exhibiting work at the James Watrous Gallery in Madison. His next show, "World Without End," will open in October at Edgewood Gallery also in Madison.

Already a fan of his precisely rendered drawings and paintings, I fell in further when I saw his ode to a small town bar at the Portrait Society and his tribute to Freddy Fender dripping with gold glitter at Watrous. Fender, by the way, inspired the title of these recent exhibitions with his country pop classic, "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights."

Large-scale drawings, sculptures and installations that portray Wisco culture, and its connections with the Tejano diaspora, practically beam with an "it's complicated" kind of Wisconsin pride that includes:

rural landscapes, muscle cars, wood paneling, beer bottles, and a sweet little lamb. Salas does not sugar coat the tension that exists in small town Wisconsin around issues of race and culture. He plays with it all, from meat raffles to plastic fruit, in a way that only an insider can do and get away with.

I have been enamored by Salas' talent since I first saw his work at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point in 2008. In 2013 I drove to Oshkosh for the opening night of "You're Invisible Now," Salas' show at Lawrence University. The experience included the added bonus of hearing the soon-to-explode on the national scene band Phox perform in the gallery space. After years of interest, it seemed high time to invite Rafael to answer a few questions for "Art City Asks."



"Allegorical Portrait of Freddy Fender" 2015, mixed media sculpture



"Jukebox" and "Salas Eat" 2015, oil on canvas

Karin Wolf: What are you working on in your studio right now?

Rafael Francisco Salas: Currently I am preparing a series of paintings and sculptural work entitled "World Without End." They compare the landscape and culture of rural taverns with religious iconography. They are meant to evoke the poetic longing that a buzzing neon sign at night can communicate from across a dark, frozen street. The exhibit will open at Edgewood College in Madison on Oct. 9 and coincide with their Dia de los Muertos events.

KW: Who's your guilty pleasure artist?

RFS: Well, as of a week ago, it is Alex Jordan, Jr., the designer of The House on the Rock near Dodgeville. Actually, I don't even feel that guilty. It's amazing!

KW: What do you wish you knew?

RFS: I wish I knew how to speak Spanish better, and I wish I knew how to pull off a great hat.

KW: What images keep you company in your work space?

RFS: Lots. I have a bent and stained reproduction of The Ghent Altarpiece by Jan and Hubert van Eyck, a reproduction of a painting by Daniel Pitin that I can't get off my mind, a drawing of my wife Kate, a photo of my dad at 3 years old in a cowboy hat in Crystal City Texas, ca.1950, a photo of a 1977 Cadillac, an illuminated page from the Middle Ages with various animals on it, and many others taped and pinned on top and beneath.

KW: What is art for?

RFS: This question makes me think of the cave paintings in Lascaux or the recently discovered Chauvet cave. These beautiful and sophisticated works were made by people with the scantest resources, and yet they had the desire and will to make them. I think our desire for art transcends our deepest knowledge.

KW: Tell me about a failed piece you once made and what you learned from it?

RFS: I made a series of musician paintings. I was trying, am still trying, to uncover the depth and beauty of country music and the blues in visual form. Instead I created awful paintings of musicians on stage, illustrative, frozen and really just gross. Ugh.

KW: What's your favorite breakfast food?

RFS: Pie.

KW: What was your first real art experience?

RFS: I never visited an art museum until I was in high school, but my grandfather had a Mexican restaurant in Wautoma. There was a velvet painting of a house and some trees next to a lake hung on the wall. The velvet created the most romantic, unrealistic darkness, and the house and lake shimmered unnaturally. I was amazed at how this falseness could make me feel so much desire to inhabit this other world.



"Wasted Days and Wasted Nights" 2015, mixed media installation



"untitled (world without end)" 2015, oil on canvas and mixed media sculpture

KW: What are you reading?

RFS: I am in the middle of "Station Eleven," by Emily St. John Mandel. A troupe of actors move from town to town performing Shakespeare after a global pandemic. The lead caravan wagon has a sign quoting a now extinct television episode of Star Trek — "Survival is insufficient." My thoughts about the cave paintings seem relevant.

KW: What do you like the look of?

RFS: The fake rigidity of a cut lawn, twinkly lights in the dark, colorful plastic in the forest. Cars.

KW: What film has most influenced you?

RFS: I mentioned "Cave of Forgotten Dreams," by Werner Herzog. "Melancholia" by Lars Van Trier. A YouTube video of Bruce Springsteen singing "Thunder Road" at the Hammersmith Odeon in 1975.

KW: What should stay the same?

RFS: Honestly, I wish, no one would invent anything for 10 years. Let me catch up. Please.

Karin Wolf is the arts administrator for the City of Madison and a regular Art City contributor.