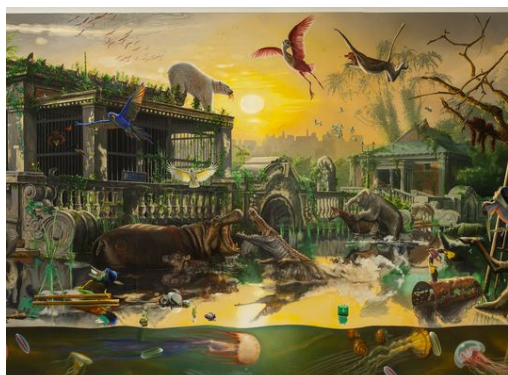


Art City: Kohler exhibits map ‘Escape Routes’

Rafael Francisco Salas, Special to the Journal Sentinel November 4, 2016



Alexis Rockman's painting depicts the "Bronx Zoo" (2012-13) after a watery holocaust. (Photo: John Michael Kohler Arts Center)

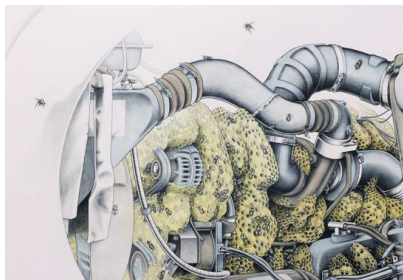
An escape route can evoke visions of cramped boats tossed about on the ocean or tunnels dug deep beneath prison walls. But escape can also lead us to a paradise found.

The John Michael Kohler Art Center in Sheboygan has taken on the theme of escape in a five-part exhibit called "Escape Routes," continuing its innovative tradition of exhibiting world famous and self-taught artists side by side. These artists describe their visions of flight with magic, whimsy and highly polished craft. Invented aircraft, boats, spirit guides and the internal act of creativity itself are utilized to examine how to make a clean getaway.

The exhibit opens with a massive drawing created using hundreds of Sharpies directly on the wall above the entryway. Ethan Murrow's "Barter" shows a lone figure precariously navigating a strange sailing vessel (with wheels?) on the open water. It is hard to tell if he is landing or taking off. His craft is tipping and the barter he seems to be making is with his courage and the ornery wind he has encountered. The drawing, framed in a romantic, oval composition, recalls the heroic landscapes of the Hudson River School. The viewer senses that the sailor may have made a poor bargain.

In contrast, Patrick Jacobs has literally created a tiny window to another world. The viewer can escape the confines of the gallery by peeking through a small hole in the wall. Beyond it is a tiny grouping of mushrooms, puff balls and lichen in a three-dimensional diorama behind glass. Styrene, paper, vinyl and artificial light combine to create an idyllic and minutely detailed panorama of early spring. I was reminded of Albrecht Dürer's exquisite watercolor of a small patch of grass. Both are riveting and transporting events.

Dystopia, and escaping from or within it, is a theme that pervades a number of works here. Alexis Rockman has painted a panorama of the Bronx Zoo after a watery holocaust. The animals, escaped or dead, fight, feed and fornicate with abandon in the partially submerged ruin of the zoo. Rockman shows the polar bear triumphant and calm atop his cage, the sunset silhouetting bloody viscera still hanging from his mouth. Nearby, a baboon leaps through the air to bring down an exotic airborne bird. Below this melee is the menagerie of the zoo in complete abandon, while below the surface of the water float jellyfish and garbage. A poignantly disemboweled panda lies on its side in the corner of the painting. The animals have escaped, but to what end?



In "Combustion" (2015) and other artworks, Emmy Lingscheit imagines a world where nature inhabits the periphery of once peopled places. (Photo: Emmy Lingscheit)

Similarly, Emmy Lingscheit imagines a world where nature inhabits the periphery of once peopled places. An ink drawing of the inside of a broken-down 18-wheeler shows the engine infested with honeybees. Their nest fills gaps in and around the defunct motor as the bees merrily buzz around. The drawing is cautionary tale read from an environmental perspective.

Escape can also be considered as an internal mental process.

Artists are perhaps singularly qualified to express this inner vision. Dan Miller is autistic and possesses few communication skills. His artwork becomes an escape for his thoughts. Miller creates large abstract expressionist works on paper. The paintings are dense with layers of ink and acrylic paint and dominate the gallery walls with deep psychology. Indeed, they are perhaps the true distillation of what the abstract expressionist painters we recognize, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko — were trying to achieve — purely painted emotion.

Miller expands on his paintings with long text pieces on paper. On them he repeats words and phrases crookedly cranked out on a manual typewriter. Words like "Wall" and "Ceiling" are typed again and again until they appear as a ritualistic mantra. Perhaps these words exemplify Miller's frustration about the extent to which he can communicate to the world beyond his artwork.

Gregory Van Maanen also uses his artwork to exorcise the demons in his mind that pursue him. A Vietnam War veteran with PTSD and other impairments, Van Maanen paints symbolic skulls, all-seeing



Gregory Van Maanen's paintings, including "The Art of Majik" (1989), incorporate symbolic skulls, all-seeing eyes and other imagery that the artist believes offer him spiritual protection. (Photo: John Michael Kohler Arts Center)

eyes and other imagery that he says offer him spiritual protection. These spirit guides allow Van Maanen to move through the world more safely. The skulls, hands and hearts at times appear menacing, painted with glowing eyes and fierce teeth. But Van Maanen sees these figures as benign. Perhaps to the artist they are benevolent, but they communicate a ferocity that would lay their enemies low. They are remarkable, shamanistic and indelible.

Other methods of escape in the exhibit show people drifting off the grid and living on the fringes of society. Artists trapped by repressive regimes use their art to creatively unchain themselves. Our political climate, our environment and our place in culture need not be fixed. This exhibit shows there is always a way out.

"Escape Routes" is on view through Jan. 20 at Kohler Arts Center, 608 New York Ave., Sheboygan. For information, visit jmkac.org.

Rafael Francisco Salas is an artist, an associate professor of art at Ripon College and a regular Art City contributor.