

American Dream Just Out of Reach in 'For God and Country'

BY SHANE MCADAMS JUL. 02, 2019 3:46 P.M.



"I don't wait up for days for your voice to answer to me no more" 2018, Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

A native of Wisconsin, artist Rafael Francisco Salas has resided in the state continuously with the exception of a brief detour during his college years to study art. His new exhibition, “For God and Country,” (at Portrait Society Gallery through Aug. 3) explores his complex relationship with his native region, where he “experienced a kind of displacement” and “a pervasive sense of otherness” growing up. Salas notes that his otherness stems from his Mexican heritage but implies through art a still more ominous “other” lurking in the shadows of his painted landscapes. This complex spirit haunts Salas’ foreboding paintings and looms over all those marginal psychic spaces between the cultural beltways. That ghost is the rural Midwest itself.

“For God and Country” is mostly a show of paintings and drawings, with occasional cameos by sculptural elements. To the right of the entrance in the largest gallery, a working turntable and a collection of records encourages viewers to amplify the show’s mood with some Dolly Parton, George Jones or Ray Charles—a well-chosen if safe soundtrack for the 40 sooty, surreal and melancholic paintings spread throughout the three galleries. In time, the works begin to weave a loose but interconnected narrative (not unlike

“Jolene,” which was my soundtrack for the first two minutes and 40 seconds.)

Music and landscape mix bizarrely in Salas’ work. *Musician in Winter (Accordion)* features a faceless suited figure twisting off a song on a scrubby patch of earth in a falling snow. The only discernable color (though Salas has a knack for teasing out the chromatic possibilities of gray) are two small green squares in different shades in the upper right. They read a little like four-color processing test squares, but I couldn’t help but think of the green light at the end of Jay Gatsby’s dock signifying the elusive American Dream floating on a horizon just out of reach.

The cumbersome landscapes in the show are buoyed by music—both depicted and actual—and by those anomalous touches of color. The strange relationships come across as profoundly personal but also out-facing and composed. “For God and Country” feels cinematic, which is also to say it feels directed and even scripted at times, in the best possible sense. Salas’ confessional visions are filtered cleanly through a filmic sensibility that allows us to inhabit his world from a critical distance.

The suggestively titled *I don't stand out all night in empty fields and call your name no more* for instance, with its forlorn landscape worked by four suited figures, evokes the wind-beaten sadness of a cold day in the Northern Plains as deftly as the Cohen brothers do in *Fargo*. Remember that aerial shot of the parking and William H. Macy's lonely sedan? Kind of like that.

The ashen, faceless men and women in the show are opposed emphatically by several colorful paintings of pixelated images. One of those works might be of a patriotic figure against an American flag bearing the show's title. It's the first piece in the show as you enter the space and serves as a brilliant metaphor for the Salas' hunt for the spirit of place. Even as I write this, I'm not sure whether the image is in fact of an individual against an American flag, or whether I was merely projecting a memory or even manifesting an aspirational vision. Maybe there's no flag and no figure. Maybe it's a candy cane and a stuffed beaver. The ambiguity seems to get to the point of the show. Are the colors, and symbols and mythologies of America actually there? Are they conjured fictions? Are they misty nostalgic memories? These questions are even more pressing at a time when America is so divided socially, culturally, spiritually and geographically. And yet, somehow, many of the most

forsaken and neglected flyover places in the land are the ones flying the most colorful visions of the American mythos. Salas is onto something with these contradictory visions of his proud but ailing rural Midwest, the same way Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and John Steuart Curry were before him.