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A Tale of Two Americas: A Review of Rafael Francisco Salas at Milwaukee's Portrait Society Gallery

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Rafael Francisco Salas, "I don't stand out all night in empty fields and call your name no more," 2018.
Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches/Courtesy Portrait Society Gallery

RECOMMENDED

Anyone who grew up in rural America and later moved away will recognize the perspective of homecoming in Rafael Francisco Salas' "For God and Country," at Milwaukee's Portrait Society Gallery. The collection of works in paint, ink, collage and a few sculptural pieces by the son of a

Mexican-American migrant worker and a mother who left the suburbs to farm sheep reflects the many textures that constitute a personal and national dichotomy of place.

Throughout the exhibition, nearly faceless musicians and workers in suits and dresses toil, contemplate and intone wintery pastoral scenes in chilly tones and suggestive strokes that veer, to varying degrees, into pixilation. The pixilation appears only on a man's elbow and hands in "Man Touching the Earth," but takes over the entire canvas in "For God and Country," which blooms from quiet earth tones to dynamic reds. These accents of bright color, in the form of pastel and primary rectangles that creep at the edges of the images as well as in roadside reflectors, floral inserts and strings of pendants, remind the viewer of the urban and modern gaze through which such scenes are made manifest.

Such amicable juxtapositions abound, making repeated viewing of any piece not unlike our often mixed feelings about the weather in the Midwest. "Man Lying in a Field" – sans bright interruption and with little pixilation – shows a prone, suited figure, one knee bent, arm outstretched, hat on breast, in muted greens, browns and grays. Is he exhausted and beaten by the field or luxuriating in the earth that supports him and the vast sky above? Maybe both. The white of his head sends flakes of himself to the surrounding ground in gift or surrender. His only facial feature, his mouth, is depicted as a black oval, wide in relish or anguish.

This black oval graces the faces of several figures, most notably in the ink and sculptural series of musicians, and the wholly enchanting and symphonic "Night Singer #1" and "Night Singer #2." Not only does the oval beg interpretation of the singers' song, but it draws the figures into the realm of memory or dream, where the crispness of details blur and emotions and senses dominate. While the landscape and figures set us in time and place, Salas relies on music to enhance our emotional understanding and cement our nostalgia. The artist says much about the dire state of farming in America with his depictions of workers in spent and snowy farmland in the pieces, "I don't stand out all night in empty fields and call your name no more" and "Study of men in a field." And yet, "Musicians in Winter (accordion)" and then "(guitar)," perhaps the most stunning pieces in the show, feature tall, handsome men, sure in suits and hats, filling the snowy night with a song of lament or celebration that captures the complexity of the figures, as well as Salas' and our own relationship with the land.



Rafael Francisco Salas, "Test Pattern and Flowers #2," 2019. Oil on canvas, 20 x 20 inches

As song has, through the centuries, accompanied field work and conveyed its hardship and pride to outsiders, so the media today tries to explain the two Americas – urban and rural – to each other. This dichotomy, too, between the technological and bucolic, the experienced and the relayed, plays a role in Salas' exploration of reconciliation of new and old, urban and rural. In "Test Pattern and Flowers #1" and "#2," flowers and erosion grow on square canvases of early black-and-white television test patterns. The small tensions present throughout the body of work exude more bluegrass and country harmony than discord, perhaps an arrival for the artist and a wish for a country that is so often divided along county lines. (Steph Kilen)

Rafael Francisco Salas' "For God and Country," Milwaukee's Portrait Society Gallery, 207 East Buffalo, Suite 526, through August 3