

LAND LEFT BEHIND

By Nickolas Butler

So much of Rural America, and certainly Rural Wisconsin, is a haunted landscape. Decaying Main Streets marked by shuttered movie theaters, bankrupt bowling alleys, and boarded-up small-businesses. Farms that have been consumed by corporate growers, now identifiable only by abandoned once-proud homesteads, collapsed barns, and perhaps a row or two of ancient lilac bushes. I know this landscape well, and I love this landscape; it is where I have chosen to live. And this is the landscape that Rafael Francisco Salas depicts so authentically in five new images for Portrait Society Gallery's December 2020 show, "What on Earth."

In "A Lamb #1" and "Entrance with Deer and a Black Cat" the promising pastoral propaganda of earlier American landscape-art is both acknowledged and sidestepped. Any trace of humanity in these pieces is as if a muddled memory. The two recently butchered bucks in "Entrance" hang, splayed open, dripping blood onto an empty porch, save for a single black cat (superstitious, anyone?) perhaps waiting for an opportunity to lap up a little spilled blood. But no hunters are jauntily pictured. This isn't the celebratory hunting scene of yore. There is a starkness here that belies a hard-luck landscape. In "Lamb" the viewer observes the vulnerable creature from beyond a darkened frame of overgrown flora. No fences or buildings exist in the picture, no footprints, no collar, or ear-tag. This is an animal without its herd or shepherd, laying, or perhaps cowering in upon itself – lost. For what is a single lamb upon this thankless landscape but *dead*?

In the paintings "In Flowered Fields #1 and #2," what is remarkable is not the almost garish Black-eyed Susans, phlox, milkweed, and Queen Anne's lace of the foreground, but the nearly desolate, almost antiseptic background. Like so much of Wisconsin's landscape, once a crop has been harvested, a field is rendered utterly bereft – practically barren. But those flowers are a playful gesture of what once was. Was that patch cultivated by some old farmer's wife? Some remnant prairie at the margin of a cemetery, persisting still?

The final painting, "Black Rainbow," is the most darkly humorous. Some child's playground, a half-buried tire, now alone, surrounded by no other play-equipment, no forgotten shoes, no jump-ropes, or bright rubber balls. Just an arc of rubber only hopeful for who once might have played there, or who once sunk that tire in place, dreaming of future-children who would climb that rainbow through time, dreaming. Tellingly, we see both ends of this rainbow, but there is the immediate desolate knowledge that we will not be granted two wishes. Only a sort of bleak memory of again, what once was.

Rafael Francisco Salas is an artist who deftly and intimately captures the soul of a Midwestern landscape left behind. A landscape whose memories are richer and more dreamlike than its future, a future where farms are not homes, but mono-cultured corporate flatlands. Where children are ghosts gone on to bigger cities. Where farmyard animals wait for farmers who aren't coming to throw them hay or lead them to some warm barn. There is hope in these

landscapes, but you need to blow the dust off the surface to see it. You need to rub the windowpane clean and glance outside, and with a desire to see magic where others might not. In this way, Salas is a magician. He's pulling a black cat out of a hat or maybe hiding a bouquet of flowers up his sleeve. He'll point to an empty field and tell you there's a rainbow if you look hard enough. Salas' landscapes celebrate the uneasy, hard-won beauty of a forgotten landscape without walking in tired footprints. These are original, witty, magical images of our present, haunted by ghosts of our past.

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