

NOT DARK YET

In his recent artwork Rafael Francisco Salas explores the mythology of the Midwestern landscape. He's drawing and painting rural spaces located at an imaginary latitude north of the horizon, just shy of the real. It's a mapping of Salas himself.

Salas' art makes the everyday totemic. Things feel well seen, as they are, and yet transformed. The elated face of a young child emptying a bucket of dirt onto the ground conjures the memory of childhood in its strange glory. A truck tire half buried in a grassy expanse with golden dandelions set against a dreamy gloaming sky creates a dark rainbow. Fall flowers in a field, funereal and joyous, make all of life— the one you live not just in your head— in its vastness and its specificity feel manifest. This Midwestern landscape has become Salas' interiority, its patterns and places as intimate as emotions. As if he's discovered the inside of outside.

It looks like it's always twilight in these landscapes, be that of hopeful light at dawn or the final blue of the end of the day, I don't know. But something's looming. Like in the majestic painting "Untitled Landscape" where a dark abstract rectangle hovers in a fallow field like a censored painting within a painting. The possibilities deepen with the painting "A Hole in the Earth" in which thawed snow has revealed the remains of an old well, some opening into underground, what you're tempted to call The Underworld. It feels even closer at hand in the piece "Allegorical Setting with Cat and Deer" in which from the overhang of a rustic structure, maybe it's a house, perhaps a barn, like a building you stumble across in a dream, a dead deer has been suspended upside down, and a man, barely holding himself together, lurches toward a very dark doorway where a black cat sits and stares and waits for us to call it a sign. The symbolism becomes more overt in the drawing "Study of Interior and Landscape with Skull" where a huge classical

memento mori floats above the field beyond the empty barn. There are hints of Corot in the tint of the trees, the cast of the skies. And Goya has been here with his grotesquerie. Anselm Kiefer's solemn tones too have blessed the work. But to name it seems beside the point. You feel it. You see it. You can almost hear it.

Oftentimes snippets of music come to me when looking at Salas' work, and he's made the connection between his artwork and music explicit in his paintings of abstracted album covers and the series featuring musicians outside, which concluded with the epic painting "Coda" that gathers the entire troupe dressed in their Sunday best at the cusp where the woods meets the fields arranged around a gaping hole in the earth, and when the drum begins to bang, they play that rousing number. But who can say what painted music sounds like? That mystery, that silent inquiry is core to Salas' work.

Salas' artwork creates a space for contemplation and reflection, figures the relationship between

identity and otherness, nature, nation, and nurture, of hauntings both personal and historical, and its operatic realism rewards close looking. The style is loose and confident, be it a drawing of corn stalks emblematic of the midwest as any flag, or in the iconic painting "Very Dark Snowman" where the Christmas lights strewn about its base glow with the clarity of manufactured cheer and the dark surprise of the snowman's expression— those eyes, that mouth— radiates an ore-like richness.

In particular the figures that appear in the paintings provide great pleasure. Often abstracted, gestural, almost disfigured— a woman with three hands, a man walking with a comportment so bent it would make a hunchback wince— the painting of them is an expression of artistic freedom. And from my perspective these are portraits of privacy, of inwardness, of creation. Examples of how we dwell inside our body, as bodies. How we compose ourselves when no one is watching. I feel these figures represent the edge of

the map, uncharted territory, which is perhaps why they have such endearing monstrous qualities.

Looking at Salas' artwork I feel myself akin to the figure in "Untitled Interior (Horses)" gazing at art arranged on a wall, paintings of horses (all copies of works by the 18th Century British painter George Stubbs), a creature born of the imagination into a landscape of darkness shining within darkness. The painting seems to ask: What is art for? What's the purpose of looking at it? Thinking these thoughts, I keep returning to the paintings and drawings of fields foreshortened by fences or centered with an empty corral-like enclosure, and wondering: How have we cut ourselves off? What do we need to be set free? What's out there in the distance?

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