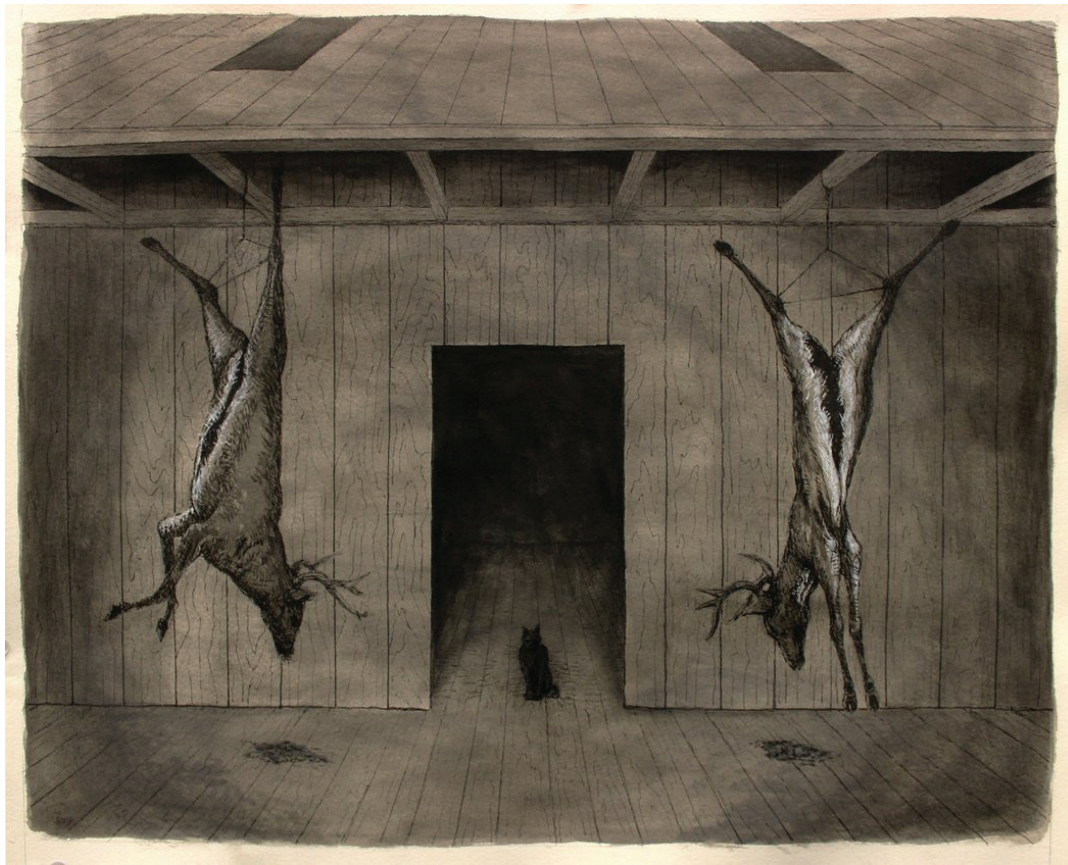


Dark Country Dominates Salas' MOWA Exhibit

JANUARY 21, 2021 BY MICHAEL MUCKIAN

The imagery is fanciful, evocative and speaks to the heart of the world in which artist Rafael Francisco Salas was raised.

A cluster of small, bright flowers grow on dark stems with a night field almost luminescent in the darkness stretching out behind. A seven-member doll-like mariachi band performs in grove of dark trees fronting a vast open space. Two bucks, gutted but otherwise pristine, hang upside down from coat hangers flanking a doorway occupied by a small black cat.



ART BY RAFAEL FRANCISCO SALAS

These are images of a life remembered by the artist, born in Milwaukee and raised on a farm in Wautoma, seen through a glass darkly. "In Flowered Fields" is the first of three exhibits designed to help the Museum of Wisconsin Art celebrate its 60th anniversary year.

The exhibit, which opens Saturday, Jan. 23 in the gallery at Saint Kate-The Arts Hotel in Downtown Milwaukee, is comprised of 15 works by Salas, who sits on the MOWA board of directors. An additional 25 rural images by 13 other artists chosen from the museum's permanent collection complete the exhibit with an enhanced context that includes tractor tires, raw sheep's wool and other accoutrements from agrarian life.

Pulls No Punches

“Marrying Rafael Salas’ work with items from the permanent collection sums up MOWA’s commitment to contemporary art while still presenting a lens for viewing the past,” says J. Tyler Friedman, curator of the exhibit that includes art from 1907 to present day. “It’s also timely given the political environment we’re in. There’s nothing polemical about the exhibition, but it also doesn’t pull any punches.”

Salas himself comes from a political activism background. His mother, born in Brown Deer, was an active participant in the Milwaukee civil rights marches led by Father James Groppi in the 1960s. His father, part of a Mexican-American family who relocated from Texas to Wautoma, met his mother when they both protested as part of the United Farm Workers’ California grape boycott led by Cesar Chavez.

Salas currently lives in Ripon and teaches art at Ripon College. But it was earlier, while he was doing graduate work in New York City, that much of the art on display in the exhibit began to formulate in his mind.

Sense of Memory

“It was in 2004 that I began painting remembered landscapes from growing up on a farm in Wisconsin,” Salas says. “When I moved back to the state, I found that being there helped propel my imagery. My work has retained that sense of memory and nostalgia. But if I read them objectively, I would say they are ‘conflicted’, images of great beauty combined with a pervasive sadness.”

Salas has armed the exhibit with an 83-minute Spotify playlist of 26 songs from the country and Americana genres, featuring everyone from Neil Young, Bob Dylan and Andrew Bird to The Carter Family, Justin Vernon, Charley Patton and Hurray for the Ruff Raff. Salas, who grew up on country music, believes the songs represent emotions similar to those in his paintings.

“Country music itself has that blend of love and loss, of nostalgic remembering of a rural past which may or may not be true,” he says. “Living in rural America is a combination of those conflicts, with economic challenges that contain the politics of resentment in small towns, at least in Wisconsin. “

While he admits the work, like that of most artists, represents his own psyche, he knows that it’s also a reflection of the environment in which he lives and works. Many of the exhibition paintings were done during last spring’s sabbatical semester, an election and pandemic season when feelings of rural alienation were at their height.

“People in small towns feel they are the forgotten population—and they may be right,” Salas says. “It’s the politics of resentment, of disenfranchisement and anger about lack of power or control that many rural people have. They are missing a changing America, one that didn’t exist anymore, and that mood and color entered into my work.”

Salas also sees a continuum between the works chosen from the permanent collection and his work in content, if not tonality. “I was excited to do this project, combining my work with painters whom I admire and who have influenced me,” he adds. “I sometimes see the hidden affinity between those works and mine. I think together we tell a continuing story.”

In Flowered Fields, part of the Museum of Wisconsin Arts 60th anniversary celebration, runs through May 2 at Saint Kate-The Arts Hotel, 139 E. Kilbourn Ave.