



# AFTER THE FALL

BY: RAFAEL SALAS

Artist Fred Stonehouse has created a torrent of dream logic full of unknown magic, humor and vulnerability in his cumulative body of paintings entitled "Falling Waters."

Stonehouse recalls climbing a stairwell hung with amateur paintings of waterfalls. As the images passed by, they entered the artist's imagination as a stage for his not-so-peaceable kingdom of monsters, losers and anguished souls to cavort. This happens, of course. Artists discover entirely new worlds from the most ephemeral notions.

The subsequent paintings are awash in Stonehouse signatures - an amalgam of visual influences ranging from the carnivalesque to the rich arcanae of art history. Red devils sweat in wet heat, allegorical serpents and impossible, mythical pairings both animal and human populate these works.

As its title suggests, "Falling Waters" takes the landscape itself as a central character. Stonehouse has placed his menagerie into kitschy, Edenic lands of make-believe. His imagined waterfalls are painted like utopian visions taken from low-rent vacation pamphlets or the unattainable beauty of a beer commercial vista. It is a heightened experience.

Waterfalls, like the rivers that spawn them and the oceans they thread towards, are full of allegory and symbolic portent. They can evoke destiny, journeys, fate, or life itself. Stonehouse allows the viewer to reflect their own vision of what these waters contain. It is this ambiguity, this promise of meaning somewhere in the distance, that gives these paintings much of their power. They require the viewer to live within mystery.

As mysterious as they are, Stonehouse also uses these paintings as a vehicle for autobiography. "Fall" depicts a boy in tighty whities and striped t-shirt being assaulted by bees. As he cries and looks over his shoulder in fright, he tumbles from a waterfall into a moonlit pool of green water. His flesh is pocked by angry welts on his forehead, abdomen, and legs. Stonehouse recounts being repeatedly stung after sitting on a wasp's nest. In recollection this is humorous but in the moment an episode of abject terror. We see this duality and more in this painting. The boy falls, but the painting is composed with geometric rigor, locking the action in place like the closed-form, rigid gestures of Balthus or Piero della Francesca. The scene is violent and funny, the landscape itself peaceful and serene. The moon reflects off the water and bears silent witness to this absurd tragedy.

Opposite: *FALL*, (detail), 2021. Acrylic on Panel, 30 x 27" *framed*



Other characters and objects from the Stonehouse universe also vacillate between the universal, the mythical and the deeply personal. “Buck” displays a standing portrait of an antlered deer’s head with a human body. Composed like the Biblical figures of Lucas Cranach the Elder, the central figure is surrounded by symbolic landscapes. The magical creature gently weeps as he holds a red serpent in his arms, its tongue snaking forth to kiss the lips of the deer. Surrounded by titular waterfalls and submerged knee deep in dirty water, the figure is once again clothed only in underwear, a consummate, and hilarious trope of degradation and vulnerability.

Stonehouse has painted these landscapes in startling greens and yellows, combinations of acidic cadmium and phthalocyanine hues. The artist applies acrylic paint using old master techniques of translucent layering to create a deeply sensual and satisfying quality. It’s like looking at the world through a piece of hard candy.



FIGURE I, Lucas Cranach the Elder.  
*ADAM AND EVE*, 1526.  
Oil on Panel, 46 x 32”

Other paintings depict children in Halloween costumes, Burtonesque in their spooky humor. Animals, vegetables, and insects engage in insipid acts - leaping, salivating, crying and dripping into the falling waters of their world, a purgatory both beautiful and terrible, poised towards meaning, but never quite arriving.

Viewing these paintings reminded me of what it was like to attend church as a child, where the parables were visceral, often scary, but their deeper meanings remaining beyond comprehension. The end of the story, the great truth, must be out there somewhere, but damned if I know if we’ll ever find it.

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