

Perchance to Dream : The art of dark imaginings at SPACES

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IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: Psychodrama in Contemporary Painting, on view at SPACES through May 14, includes some of the most visually and conceptually compelling work to grace the gallery walls in a long time. The exhibition centers on scenarios filled with idiosyncratic characters who act out anxieties and psychodramas in their own imaginary worlds. Exhibition curators Joanne Cohen and Julie Langsam were inspired by the work of outsider artist Henry Darger, and one his signature two-sided drawings is included in the exhibition.

Darger, who was born in 1892 and died in 1973, spent a tortured life in Chicago, where he lived in a one-and-a-half-room apartment, performed menial jobs at local hospitals, and wrote a 15-volume, 15,145 page novel titled *In the Realms of the Unreal*, an 8,500-page sequel, and created several hundred pencil and watercolor drawings and sketches. Darger's work was made public by his landlord, who was charged with the task of dispersing Darger's belongings after his death.



CLASSICAL COMPOSITION
Boy Before Baghdad by Thomas Frontini.

Darger is the embodiment of the frenetic outsider artist. He lived in seclusion, had no friends or family, worked tedious jobs, and at the end of the day went home to his squalid living space and made enchanted yet disturbing works of art. His story is made even more seductive by the fact that after his father died, Darger grew up in institutions, and as an adult was thought to be insane. Rumors abound over the degree of his insanity; some art historians even connect him to the murder of 5-year-old Elsie Paroubek, who was abducted and strangled in Chicago in 1911. While this claim has never been proven, it is indicative of the obsession with the legends surrounding Darger.

In the 1980s, the biographical details of outsider artists' lives became key selling points for their work, adding to the mystique of the prescient artist-savant. Darger's detailed drawings illustrate an intensely complex emotional world-cum-battlefield, inhabited with myriad imaginary characters such as the brave Vivian Sisters, the evil Gladelinians, the good Christian Abbieannians, as well as a host of simplistically styled white children who look like girls but often have male genitals.

Unlike the detritus of most sensationalist scenarios, there is real substance to Darger's work. While the piece in the SPACES exhibition may not be one of his best, the nine-foot-wide, double-sided watercolor and pencil drawing is a visual banquet, indicative of an artist who was ahead of his time. To create his army of child-characters, Darger collected hundreds of cartoon-like drawings from advertisements and traced or copied them, essentially appropriating the images. His landscapes are vividly rendered, colorful and

disturbingly beautiful.

Despite the stellar selection of work in this exhibition, there is an obvious flaw. The curators have attempted to link Darger with the other artists in the exhibition without acknowledging certain key distinctions. Darger is classified as an outsider artist, and like folk artists, outsiders are untrained and have little or no contact with the art community. The other artists in the exhibition, as revealed by their artists' statements, are not only educated, they are steeped in art-world parlance. Also, outsiders are often classified as such because they are considered "socially deviant" or abnormal in some way. While the concept of normality can be debated, there is no link between the allegedly insane Darger and the other, presumably normal, artists in the exhibition.

Instead of attempting to tie the other artists' works to Darger's, it would have been more compelling to find other thematic connections among them. It is interesting to note, for example, that all but six of the artists were born in the 1960s and '70s, and therefore bear the ubiquitous moniker of "Generation X." The curators might have explored some of the defining social factors that caused the artists to paint innocently perverse creatures, whether human, animal, monster or a combination of all three, taking part in devious activities in ambiguous or isolated settings.

In the painting *Dilemma*, Terry McKelvey, born in 1965 in Bridgeport, Conn., depicts an androgynous sleeping figure being buried alive. As a nude man raises the first shovel of dirt over the sleeping figure, another figure emerges from the dirt pile wielding a sword, as a brown rabbit looks on. The sleeping figure and painting style are reminiscent of Gauguin's *Spirit of the Dead Watching*. It reads as an illustration of a contemporary artist's nightmare; art-historical demons are ever present, and nothing in today's art world is ever original.

Western art history is also referenced in Thomas Frontini's painting *Boy Before Baghdad*. Frontini, who was born in 1967 in Kingston, Canada, portrays an effeminate-looking boy leaning on a classically rendered painting with an elegant dog. The style of the painting within is similar to the style of the painting itself. It is finely rendered in the manner of the French 19th-century painter Jean-Léon Gérôme, with its clear-blue sky, classical figure and ordered composition. As with McKelvey, art history is mined and appropriated, and an animal stands as a symbol of faith and devotion. Ultimately, the classical style lends an air of authenticity in a postmodern era of transience and insecurity.

Self Eater I, by Dana Schutz, born in 1976 in Livonia, Mich., is one of the most vibrantly emotional paintings in the exhibition. Schutz depicts a bug-eyed blonde woman eating her own limbs. The energy with which it was painted echoes the disturbing subject matter. The colors are acidic and vibrant. It is a portrayal of contemporary self-loathing and high anxiety.

Despite its curatorial flaws, *It's a Wonderful Life* is an important exhibition, and Darger's work alone makes it worth seeing. Artists have always had the ability to visually present social ills, human desire, and sublimity. As cultural artifacts, the paintings in this exhibition are a gauge of a generation's state of mind. Based on what is depicted, life in the 21st century may not be entirely wonderful, but it is certainly not dull.

SPACES is located at 2220 Superior Viaduct. Call 216.621.2314 for information.

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