

Show's painters are 'satisfying'

Feb 3, 2008

Picture big canvases where the subject, all done up in bright, candy colors, is the great wide open West, then move around a wall and there a cowboy rides stacked up chairs or swings from a chandelier and you have the current show at Branch Gallery.

Both sets of paintings are completely satisfying. Calvin Burton, with his wide expanse of colors on big canvases, speaks to us in serious terms while Javier Piñón punches holes in cowboy tales, with chairs, chandeliers and sodden heroes.

Burton's paintings are about the stories and myths of the West, mixed with elements like Thomas Jefferson, Monticello, deck homes and skyscrapers, and presents them as the stuff that makes up the persistent American optimism. Using clear jewel colors and paint that is as thin as a wash and as thick as a squirt from the tube, he gives us realistic images on uncluttered backgrounds.

In the gallery notes we read that Burton was born in Virginia but grew up in Lake Tahoe, where the wide open spaces and the American frontier are part of the local personality. I asked Teka Selman, one of the gallery directors, if this melding of America's elitist East and its wild West is a satirical look at American tastes, ideas and myths and she gave me an emphatic, "No." She said his work represents a serious attempt to reproduce his vision of America from the vantage point of knowing it from both coasts.

To this end we see a cabin situated over a mountain summit, we see imposing Mount Shasta, where UFOs were sighted, and, in the centerpiece of the show, a huge banner, with the words "Donner," dominates the surface of a very large canvas.

"Canopy" is a good example of Burton's message. Suspended over a high peak, is a realistic mountain house, firmly anchored to its platform. A large swath of angled lime green paint fits over the house and a flesh colored rectangle that doubles for a flag flies over the whole thing. The mixture of realism and abstraction and translucent paint with heavy brush strokes approaches illustration, but pulls back just in time to force us to give a longer look at what seems to be an easy read.

"Westwards" is another example, but here Burton takes off from a real 1846 story about the westward expansion. In the painting, the word "Donner" settles across large fields of green and red and hovers over a single image of the upper reaches of a vintage skyscraper. The Donner Party was a group of 87 men, women and children who followed George Donner across the United States for the promised land of California. Caught by the worst blizzard in California history, they spent five months in the mountains and when it was all over only 46 survived. Tales of cannibalism followed the survivors for the rest of their lives.

Burton gives us much to think about, and even if he is not cynical, some of his viewers will be. He is an emerging artist whose career is secure. His best canvases are spectacular.

Piñón's images are caricatures of the movie version of the cowboy. Using a collage technique, Piñón mixes Chippendale chairs and crystal chandeliers with the swaggering horsemen, whose manly abilities to ride a horse or a bull and drink whiskey are the warp and woof of every western tale.

Piñón mines furniture decorating manuals for all sorts of household chairs, from antiques to the garden variety kitchen chair, and combines them with a single cut-out of the mythical cowboy. In one, a cowpoke carefully makes his way to the top of a huge ladder of piled chairs; in another the chairs begin to topple and the cowboy falls through the air. These images are all "Untitled," but are clearly related. There's one where the cowboy sits astride the very top chair, riding it like he would a bull. And the piece de resistance is a cowboy riding a swinging crystal chandelier with one arm raised upward in victory.

His paintings are meticulously fashioned; each cutout is carefully attached and makes a strong contrast against its stark white background.

Piñón also moved from one region of the country to another. His move was from Miami to Texas, both geographically Southern, but they could not be more different. The gallery notes tell us that he went to Texas at an early age, where he began his life-long fascination with the cowboy.

These are wonderfully funny and clever, but the question nags: How long can he sustain this idea and where will he go from here?

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