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### **Flatlanders @ Nelson Gallery, UCD**

**Posted on 23 July 2010**

**Tags: David M. Roth, Flatlanders, Richard L. Nelson Gallery**

Contrary to Bay Area opinion, which holds that Sacramento is a backwater, *Flatlanders*, now in its third installment, stands as a sharp and smart rebuke. It not only serves as a showcase for emerging artists, but also spotlights area artists who long ago established regional, national and international reputations.

The haul during these past few years has been rich and diverse, and if nothing else, a testament to the taste and well-known eccentricities of Renny Pritikin who, like any good curator, scours the landscape to unearth novelty and quality, both of which appear in equal proportions in this bi-annual show of Sacramento-area artists.

Where in the beginning, in 2006, Pritikin included nearly 50 artists, he has now culled the herd to a manageable eight: Michael Stevens, Irving Marcus, Jim Albertson, Suzanne Adan, Jack Ogden, Patrick Marasso, Ianna Frisby and Mitra Fabian. They range in age from their mid-30s to 81— a fact that normally wouldn't mean much; but

here age really does matter: The older artists – those in their 60s, 70s and 80s — who grew up under the influence of the Chicago Imagists, exhibit a gnarled, battle-hardened cynicism that simply isn't present in the younger artists.

Pritikin didn't set out to build a theme show, but certain themes do jump out. A fitting and encompassing subtitle for this one might be *Americana*. Each artist, in their own way, speaks about American culture and history, sometimes through the jaded lens of harsh personal experience, sometimes not. That the pieces don't all fit together perfectly doesn't really matter; there's enough coherence and quality here to more than compensate. Clearly, the loudest, most boisterous "conversation" in the show takes place in the main gallery between Stevens, Albertson, Marcus and Adan.



Irving Marcus, "Cult", 2010, oil on canvas, 38 x 65"



Michael Stevens, "Three Wishes", 2009, pine and enamel, 72 x 46 x 24"

In

Stevens' work, deceptions, double crosses, abductions, disappointments and bad outcomes play out in wood sculptures based on fictional cartoon characters that recall early days of television – days of supposed innocence. Into that fiction, which exploded in the '60s with assassinations, violence and protest, Stevens, 65,

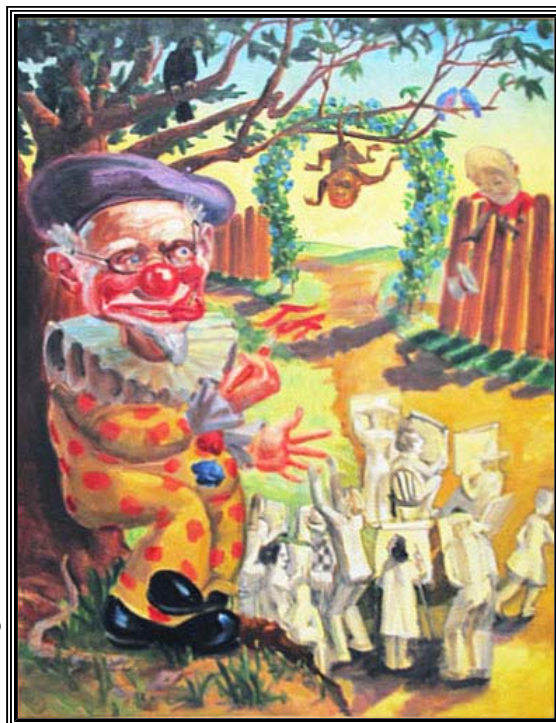
lobs a grenade of his own.

His meticulously carved pieces, which often employ thrift-store paintings as backdrops, posit a Howdy Doody-meets-Alfred Hitchcock universe where demons lurk behind every white picket fence. As the artist explained in a *Squarecylinder* profile last year, "I'm a satirist. I draw on universal situations, like being out on a limb and using a comedic saw to cut yourself down, as in *Three Wishes*, "where you have three choices for the place where you will fall. The imagery that I use talks about the human condition, that theatrical predicament that we're all in." *Chop Suey*, a floor mounted work that acts as a focal point for the exhibition, is also a signature piece for Stevens. In it, symbols of an American dream run aground – a hatchet, a saw, a fish, a suitcase, a log cabin and a lunch pail – pile up on the back of a dog: a teetering structure of idyllic, homespun icons that flash like a warning signal saying: "This could happen to you."

Dark visions emanate, too, from Irving Marcus, 81, but they're brightened and considerably softened by his Fauvist color palette — and by a floating cast of characters (devils, terrorists, prostitutes, politicians) whose positions in space are ambiguous. As Mark Van Proyen observed some years back, these fractured allegories "express a confused consciousness of their own disembodied state, as though discontented with their reality yet unable to do anything to improve it." The paintings on view here — *911*, *Brothel* and *Cult* – work similarly; they insist on the persistence of evil, yet their hallucinatory colors and disjointed structures vehemently deny it, like a person who's witnessed a crime but can't acknowledge having seen it.

In contrast, Jim Albertson seems to have witnessed all manner of nastiness with his eyes pinned open. In 1978 he achieved notoriety by being included in Marcia Tucker's ground-breaking New Museum show, *Bad Painting*.

The term doesn't refer to badness *per se*, but to the collective nose-thumbing certain artists gave to conventional notions of high and low, presaging the breakdown of categories that would soon follow. Working in an imagistic style similar to that of his then-partner, Louise Stanley, Albertson repurposes classical themes and myths, rendering lecherous and often mute characters in a loose hand and in lurid colors. His oeuvre reads like a catalog of nightmares from a molested child.



Jim Albertson, "Art Lesson", 2008, oil on canvas, 40 x 30"



Suzanne Adan, "Shorthand", 2008, oil on canvas, 15 x 20"

In *Young Fragonard*, Albertson reworks The Swing, Fragonard's painting of a woman's skirt blowing open to prying eyes. In this version, a zombie-eyed mother with exposed thighs stiffly attempts to caress a swinging boy. The kid looks terrified, and so does a fleeing cat. *Art Lesson*, a self-portrait, shows the artist-instructor as a leering, tongue-wagging clown, towering over his acolytes.

Suzanne Adan, 64, to whom Stevens is married, makes some of the most mysterious paintings you're likely see anywhere. Filled with figures, objects, animals, text snippets and symbols, her paintings owe equal debts to '40s-era American cartoons, Joan Miro and to Jim Nutt, a seminal influence who taught briefly at Sac State in the early '70s, and whose roots in Surrealism are clearly seen in the frozen-in-time dream sequences that appear in Adan's energetic canvases. Like the visionary artists that first inspired the Imagists, Adan works in an obsessive manner; the backgrounds of her paintings consist of scalloped marks done in a heavy impasto which, in contrast to the representational elements, flatten out the action almost completely. Emptied of emotion, they echo the mute, repressed qualities seen in Stevens and Marcus.

Unlike his peers, Jack Ogden, 77, has no personal or ideological axes to grind, and as such he seems like the odd man out in this grouping. He makes pared-down oil paintings of cowboys and robber barons. But rather than reframe myths of the American West as a postmodernist might, Ogden remains a formalist, committed to executing simple narratives and portraits with the fewest marks needed to establish, character, setting and mood. His large-scale oils aim for a bravura effect, but it's his small-scale portraits that show how much impact can be squeezed from the smallest gestures. Imagine Luc Tuymans painting 19<sup>th</sup> century American plutocrats and you get some idea of what Ogden's up to in works like *Two Men in Tuxes*. The faces are smears, the backdrop is built from a few black strokes, and the domes atop the silver service tray are opposing shadows. But where Tuymans dispenses with painterly effects to make political statements, Ogden simply paints. At age 77, the former Sac State professor is vital as ever.

Patrick Marasso and Ianna Frisby, both in their 30s, offer visions of the past that are neither nostalgic nor critical. Marasso makes oil paintings from found snapshots of white, middle-class, middle-aged Americans drinking and having fun. While painting from photographs is hardly a new idea — Gerhard Richter did it most famously — Marasso's glossy-surfaced pictures exert a unique kind of pull. By themselves the throwaway

snapshots he reproduces are unremarkable. But by painting the original images at substantially larger sizes, and by exaggerating their blurry, yellowed surface textures almost to the point of parody, Marasso gives these images new meaning.



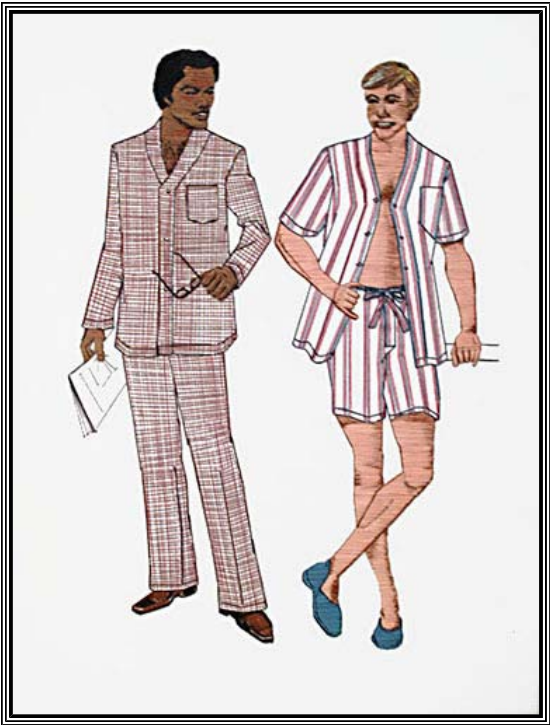
Jack Ogden, "Two Men in Tuxes", 2010, oil on canvas, 21 x 23"



Patrick Marasso, "Xmas at Joann & Pat's", 2009, 11 x 11"; "The Move", 2009, 10.5 x 10.5", both oil on panel

They force us to look for tell-tale signs, and as such, they transform banal objects into cultural artifacts, capable of telling stories that the original photographs, by virtue of their artlessness, could not. Ianna Frisby also turns one thing into another: she reproduces fashion illustrations as embroideries. At a distance they look like the originals; but up close they're all about texture and dimensionality – and, most remarkably, the skill required to turn two-dimensional representations of people and clothing into tactile objects.

Lastly, Mitra Fabian, using binder clips, constructs a floral-shaped sculpture that covers an entire wall in a room adjacent to the main gallery; it's wondrously simple and it activates the space nicely; but given the narrow dimensions of the room, it is impossible to view at a proper distance. To see what Fabian is really capable of, head to JAYJAY where several of her sculptures are on view through Aug. 7. (I'll have more to say about Fabian and the JAYJAY show in a future posting.)



Ianna Frisby, "Fashion Pattern # 3", 2010, embroidery, 24 x 16"

Given *Flatlanders*' inclusive past, some people may feel short-changed by Pritikin's abbreviated take on the Sacramento scene. But from this vantage point, less is not only more, it's flat-out better: This is the strongest, most cohesive *Flatlanders* show yet.

–DAVID. M. ROTH

*Flatlanders 3: A Regional Roundup* @ the Richard L. Nelson Gallery & Fine Art Collection, UC Davis, through August 15, 2010

Cover: Irving Marcus, *911*, 2010, oil on canvas, 40 x 60"

Photos: David M. Roth

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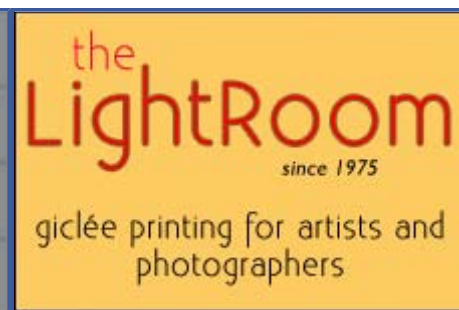
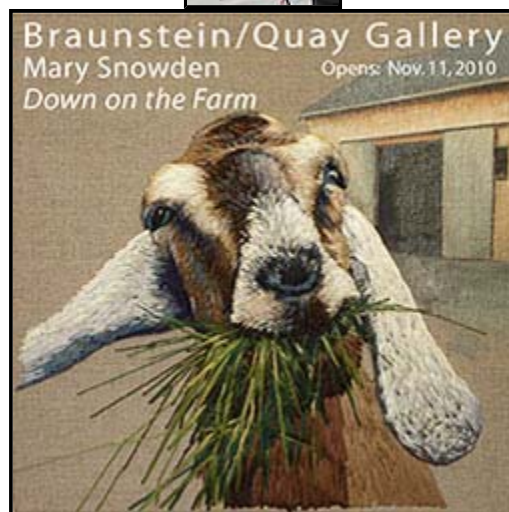
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