

HYPERALLERGIC

Inventive, Mysterious Paintings that Exceed Expectations

Jeff Sonhouse's exhibition at Tilton Gallery is visually rewarding and acutely intelligent.

By Seph Rodney, October 24, 2017

I'm convinced that one really only needs one of three things to make a good painting: compelling content, skillful facture, or formal innovation. When I find two of these criteria in a work, then I feel I'm looking at a very good painting. When all three show up, I have something that exceeds my expectations. This is the case with Jeff Sonhouse's exhibition, *Masked Reduction*, presently on view at Tilton gallery. It's staggeringly good.

I could take my pick with where I want to start entering the work, but I'm most drawn to the characters. One in particular recurs. He wears an enormous hat, has wide, full, deep chocolate lips and a fey, dispassionate gaze, and his headgear, clothing, and skin are often depicted in a harlequin pattern. In some cases his face is like stone, in others it displays a smile like a deranged grimace in its infancy. I don't know what this character is, but he's part superhero, part trickster figure, and part Delphic oracle, with a touch of Ru Paul. But I still don't think this description sufficiently captures how uncanny he is, how much he exceeds the templates I've suggested. I felt so curious I asked the artist how the character came to be, and Sonhouse replied that he took the harlequin pattern from Picasso, but the rest consist of an amalgam of images from men's fashion magazines. In "Repeat Offender" (2017), more of his body is depicted than in the other paintings, and here it is wrapped in a skin-tight yellow unitard with a superhero's musculature showing through. He is extravagantly weaponized. He holds a shotgun in one hand; others twirl behind him, and his penis is itself a shotgun facing upwards, aligned with his torso. It has seemingly just been discharged straight underneath the figure's chin and jaw, producing a cloud of smoke that emerges from the painting as steel and copper wool affixed to the canvas. Researching older work of his I realize that Sonhouse has applied steel wool to his paintings before, in various ways. However, seeing for the first time in person this kind of melding of coarse materials with smoothly sleek paint in a surreal narrative of psycho-sexual, perhaps onanistic drama that (refreshingly) focuses on black characters, I have to imagine that in his paintings anything can happen.



Image: Jeff Sonhouse, "Repeat Offender" (2017), oil, steel wool, and copper wool on fiberboard with artist's frame, 99 5/8 x 63 5/8 x 3 1/4 inches

moniquemeloche

In terms of the workmanship, Sonhouse's style is so clean it verges on being illustrative. I didn't see any brush strokes. This works for him because the characters and scenes are so exactly and beautifully rendered that the works become rabbit hole illusions I'm happy to fall into. More, throughout the exhibition Sonhouse blends his concocted surreal scenes with inventive, painterly surprises. For example, in "Wobbling Occupants Ripe for Distortion" (2017) a shadow becomes a hem of drapery that the main character, whose skin is completely harlequined in black and white, lifts up to reveal a nude female figure. The surprise is in the character's hair and beard which is made into a three-dimensional shrub built up from the canvas with acrylic gel — it gets the visual attraction of thick, black, negro hair correct. The painting makes me think that when the term "black is beautiful" was first uttered, someone was likely looking at an afro in full bloom glistening in the sun.



The exhibition is just acutely intelligent all the way through. With other works, Sonhouse gets meta-discursive. In "Anointing of the Pistol" (2017) and "First Quarter Reportage" (2017) Sonhouse gives the viewer the sketches, the bits and pieces of the characters and scenes he has refined over time, the latter piece like a mood board or visual archive in which one can pick out the cultural themes and icons that provide the raw material for the paintings. These pieces give the viewer a window into his process, and thus aren't shy about revealing how much this work is artifice. I appreciate that these paintings can be beguiling and that be understood as a strength rather than a fault of the work.

I very rarely say this about exhibitions that I review, but this one is absolutely worth seeing. It is one of the most visually rewarding shows I've experienced this year.

Top: Jeff Sonhouse, "Witness Protection Program" (2017), gouache, watercolor, and acrylic gel medium on paper; framed dimensions: 25 1/2 x 21 3/8 x 2 inches

Bottom: Jeff Sonhouse, "Grafted Populist" (2017), oil on paper, framed dimensions: 73 5/8 x 66 x 2 inches