

Double Header at Hygienic: Paintings of Will Holub and Nathan Lewis

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By Amy J. Barry, Special to the Times:

In some ways the paintings of Will Holub and Nathan Lewis are in stark contrast. In other ways, they are quite complimentary. But one thing is certain: the work of these two talented artists is thought-provoking, inventive, and infused with both serious messages and ironic humor.

Holub and Lewis's paintings are on exhibit in New London's Hygienic Art Galleries from May 30 to June 27 with an opening reception on May 30.

Will Holub's Pairings

For this exhibit, Holub has given himself the challenge of pairing up his figurative/realist and abstract paintings created over a 30-year period while he was living in New York City (1975-1991) and Santa Fe, New Mexico (1992-2006).

Holub invites the viewer to go beyond the obvious differences between the paired paintings and discover the shared and unifying characteristics in his various approaches to art.

"I'm always willing to experiment," Holub says. "You can see how the threads of my own creative preferences exhibit themselves throughout, regardless of what the style is, either abstract—which take on a number of forms—or figurative, from the '70s or now."

Holub sees these pairings as "showing the arc of the timeline as well as how the paintings are almost uncannily related—even in their color."

For example, he points out that "Dayton" and "For Caroline," painted 30 years apart, are on the surface quite different (in style, subject, and medium) and yet there is a lot in common about the technique.

"'For Caroline' is a very textural, mixed media piece and also very much about drawing—the way the surface is incised," Holub says. "'Dayton' is also very carefully drawn and delineated. Craftsmanship has always been a hallmark of my work."

Holub is appreciative to the Hygienic for offering him "an opportunity to not just do a normal exhibition, but show a range of work and support the mandate of any non-profit arts group, which is to educate.

"My [aim] is to elevate discourse—the mission of art—through the feeling in the work," he says. "It's great to be sharing galleries with Nathan Lewis—a young, impressive painter. I've always enjoyed that kind of relationship with younger artists as I've progressed along in my career."

Holub has been visiting Southeastern Connecticut since his parents moved to North Stonington in 1980. He returned to the area a year ago when his father (recently deceased) became ill and he decided to establish permanent roots here, moving to Groton last year.

"I felt like I was coming home," Holub says. "I realized how much I loved it here even after seeing the West, South, and living in New York City. It's got all the amenities of small-town life and is close to Boston and New York, where I've exhibited. I, like many artists, have searched for a place to live and this feels right."

Holub is a member of the Hygienic Art Galleries and Cambridge Art Association, where he most recently received a Best in Show Award from Jen Mergel, curator of the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston.

Nathan Lewis's Storytelling

Nathan Lewis's oil and acrylic paintings tell stories—and even sometimes include actual text, from all different sources. A painting in the show titled “Blessed Isles,” for example, is ringed with words from a Kafka parable, a Stephen Crane poem, and a Gilbert and Sullivan song.

He also brings physical characters from history, literature, and philosophy into his work. “Strange Fruit” includes Mussolini and his mistress, characters from “Waiting for Godot,” and a Johnny Ramone look-alike with a blue guitar.

Most of Lewis's paintings in the exhibit were completed within the last two-and-a-half years.

A resident of New Haven, Lewis studied art in the U.S. and abroad before receiving his BFA in 2000 from the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts and his MFA in 2004 from Tufts University/School of Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

He teaches painting and drawing at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield and has exhibited widely in New York and New England over the past six years.

“Most of my work is narrative; trying to imply meaning or some sort of story,” Lewis says. “Sometimes it's fairly direct and sometimes uses symbols or symbolism. A lot of my work has to do with the relationship of art to religion and the difficulties between the two. They don't always fit together very nicely.”

Lewis refers to his painting, “Hey Light,” whose title is from the song by Animal Collective.

“The figure looks dead, but the hand is sort of reaching for this light. I think it's also a metaphor in terms of painting—what your hands can do, how [artists] really see light and understand light and paint light.”

Humor and seriousness come into play in “Mockingbird,” a “landscape painting” in which a hand holds up a sign that says, “Anything you think or do has already been thought of or done by someone else smarter and more talented than you” and underneath in fine print, “Can you triumph over this thought?”

“In terms of painting a beautiful landscape, it's been done for so long, you have to be aware of the past, and in many ways that's a burden,” Lewis explains. “You have to look through a window of what's been done and find some way of making it your own.”

Lewis is looking forward to exhibiting with Holub at the Hygienic.

“It's always interesting to see how the works respond to each other. It's the really nice part of being an artist and putting stuff out there to be shown,” he says. “It gives you a new look at your work—and to see other artists' work as well.”

“Will Holub + Nathan Lewis” is on exhibit through June 27 at the Hygienic Art Galleries, 79-83 Bank Street, New London. The public is invited to an opening reception, Saturday, May 30, from 7 to 10 p.m. For more information, call 860-443-8001 or visit www.hygienic.org.

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