

Arts & Literature

Full Disclosure

A Matter of Portraits at the Will Holub + Nathan Lewis show

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Courtesy Nathan Lewis

Nathan Lewis, "Methods of Reasoning (hide and seek)," 2009, oil on canvas (detail).

Will Holub + Nathan Lewis

Through June 27. Hygienic Art Galleries, 79-83 Bank St., New London. (860) 443-8001, hygienic.org.

Yes. That is a portrait of me on one of the alcove walls, but my judgment of his painting was already clear well before I sat for Nathan Lewis over a period of several weeks last summer.

That experience should not be taken to mean that I had nothing left to learn about his work. For as long as I have been looking at it, it was not until I walked through this new show that I realized how central portraiture is to his entire project. A collector of identities, he rejects the Shakespearean assertion that "There's no art/To find the mind's construction in the face." These are not documentary renderings, keen on the difference between the apparent and the real. His art is meant to reveal the imagination and not hypocrisy.

We are all artists by accident when we dream, fashioning a world of alternatives that would not otherwise exist. To make such a world viable on canvas, to convince us that these are not only his images, but ours, is where Lewis' gifts are most clear.

What transforms each of these portrayals is their being set at the intersection of dreams and history. They retain their individuality, even in figures of smaller scale. And there are no faceless subjects in any of Lewis' work; in the painting *Hey Light (you can make me smile again)* with its prostrate form, you can still read the invisible features from the glow edging the outstretched hand and the flannel shirt's crumple.

In the self-portrait included in *Songs of Die Mutterland*, he is Gulliver or Jack's giant or Saint Paul slammed to the earth by God's question. In *Methods of Reasoning (hide and seek)*, the branch reaching towards its own shadow outlines a disarming account of characters meditating upon the comic possibilities of the interior life and the lost Eden. We have somehow all had these thoughts.

Where works of the two artists in this exhibition are juxtaposed on the first walls of the gallery, whatever their formal contrasts, there is a clear balance, as if they draw from the same fields of color in different measure.

Will Holub's *Never Weary* (an eight inch square canvas spectacularly paired with one of Lewis' grand *Comedy of Eras* panels), *Big Ryan* and *Met Ship* are each at play with patterns like the geometry of Kasimir Malevich turned baroque, or to flower.

Like the fox of Archilochus, Holub does many things, his curiosity ranging from form to form, experimenting with deceptions of scale and medium, especially in several works with laid-on segments of small panels, like the jade armor made for ancient Chinese burials or some priestly breast plates of color. Each of these is an exercise in surprise, some with small portraits scattered like faces flashing into view in the midst of an orderly mob.

In the paintings *I am a Catholic* and *Dayton*, we are among families of ghosts who remain recognizably ordinary and human, unaltered by mortality. *Ben Bommarito*, *Moberly, MO*, a more recent study from a series of veterans, is an icon of loss, a freeze frame of that person who existed before the war changed everything, and him.

That is an epiphany which brings me back to Lewis' *Hey Light*. When I first saw it, it was preparing me for a grief that I did not know was coming. That is why we stand longer in front of some portraits. No matter whose image is on the canvas, we see something of ourselves.

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