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‘Chirping in the Thickets’: Two sides of James Secor

Visual Art Review

By Mary Gow Arts Correspondent

Nov 12, 2022

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James Secor with his shows “Chirping in the Thickets” and “Creature Habits” at The Front gallery in Montpelier.

Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

Owls practice vowels, loons nest in dunes, a skunk rummages through junk. In little 3-inch by 3-inch gouache paintings, creatures behave in often unexpected ways in James Secor’s “Creature Habits.” Whimsical and witty, there’s plenty of character and fun in these tiny artworks — the originals of images in his just released picture book “Off the Wallabies & Other Creature Habits.”

“Creature Habits” are half of the story in Secor’s exhibit that opened last week at The Front in Montpelier. Secor’s bright palette, stripes and patterns carry through his imagined landscapes in his “Freedom Fries” series. Here, we see his explorations of current challenges.

Fleets of white trucks with American flags on their containers traverse wide-open spaces as a solitary figure stands in the foreground in “Looking for Hope (and My Shipments).” Flames spew from massive power plant chimneys sharing a field with cattle in “Toxic Grazing.”

Secor’s two series, each with more than 20 paintings, are at The Front gallery in his solo exhibition “Chirping in the Thickets.” These two bodies of work, all gouache on paper, were created during the same span of months.

The two series are presented in parallel alignments encircling the gallery. The larger “Freedom Fries” pieces, all 11 inches by 14 inches, are above, “Creature Habits,” below. They invite viewers to see the two themes together, as in Secor’s creative process. Each series may also be followed individually around the gallery.

“They’re kind of two sides of what I was doing in my life at that time. They show different aspects of my life during that period,” said Secor.

“The two bodies of work that come together and show me that things can be really challenging in the world but there is hope for our future, there is some sort of future possible,” he said.

Secor, who lives in Montpelier, grew up in Kentucky and graduated from Hobart and William Smith colleges in Geneva, New York, with a focus on art. He moved to Vermont in 2012 and has been drawing and painting and showing his art consistently.

His solo exhibition “#nomophobia” (the condition of no-mobile-phone-phobia) in 2017 at Studio Place Arts in Barre featured self-portraits and other subjects as seen reflected in the screen of a turned off cellphone and paintings of remembered landscapes, imagined from the aerial perspective as seen on a cellphone map app.

“Creature Habits” came about as Secor’s father, John Secor, composed little rhymes for Secor’s now 3-year-old son. His snippets had “a moose on the loose along the hypotenuse,” ice skating penguins, a bear snatching an Adirondack chair, and more.

Using his father's blue manual Royal Companion typewriter, James Secor typed the words out on 3-inch-wide paper. The typewritten letters carry the character of the device with its recognizable font and slight irregularities from the individual letter keys striking the paper.

Secor's active little fauna and their environs fill the space. An oriole conducts a tutorial to baby birds lined up on branches, a snack attack suffering yak stands reflected in its watering hole, red foxes trot through leafless copses.

After collaborating on several of the pieces, father and son decided to continue the series and bring the works together in a picture book. In the book, the images are enlarged to full-page size.

At the same time, Secor was painting giraffes and wallabies, he was delving into contemporary issues with his "Freedom Fries" paintings.

"It's like the other side of my life. Through recent years I have been thinking about all sorts of things that I think are problems. All kinds of things crop up in my subconscious," Secor said, noting that these include climate justice, energy use, nationalism and claiming of land.

In the vast American landscape of Secor's paintings, we see infrastructure, fast food, delivery vehicles and storage containers, but few people. His works are layered with stripes and patterns.

In "Claiming Land," a sedan sits in the foreground of an orange desert-like expanse, craggy mountains rising in the background. A spaceship hovers overhead as parallelograms sprinkle through the sky. Not a soul is in sight, but a thicket of American flags populates the open space.

"Three's a crowd" has a particular personal layer for Secor. In this landscape of mountains, spewing power plants and infrastructure, the shapes in the foreground may bring to mind the shadows of a family.

Some paintings have a surrealistic quality. Curled up gray house cats float through "Proud Palette," with its barn painted with an American flag. A wooden palette, its six slats painted in red and white with a star-spangled blue field, leans on a tree.

"I want to avoid in my work making it specifically anti anything or pro anything. It's more about exploring my own thoughts around so many topics," Secor said.

The Front

The Front presents "James Secor: Chirping in the Thickets," through Nov. 27, at its gallery, 6 Barre St. in Montpelier. Hours are: 4 to 7 p.m. Fridays; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays; call 802-552-0877, email info@thefrontvt.com or go online to thefrontvt.com