

THOUGHTS ON “PREDATORS AND OTHER LA STORIES” BY HILARY BAKER AND “WE HAVE LITTLE LIVES” BY ROBERT FONTENOT AT RDFA
by Tim Power

Here are paintings of victims. And survivors. Both at a distance from human society, but closer to it than the viewer is. Diversity in nature is contrasted with similarity of injury.

In the main gallery, Hilary Baker’s acrylic paintings feature foregrounded portraits of Los Angeles-area wildlife juxtaposed with distant images of the city’s iconic manmade landmarks. In a separate space, Robert Fontenot’s group of miniature oil paintings show wounded white men seemingly cast adrift in the comparatively endless white of the gallery walls, each carrying a chink in the armor of absolute privilege.

To recoin a phrase, Baker’s animals sow not, neither do they reap, yet the undeveloped pockets of LA sustains them. Although it seems that they’re caught in passing within the urban sprawl, they’re actually permanent features of the landscape. They are shown in isolation, but there’s a sense of community about them. They’re legitimate city residents. In the gallery experience, they surround the viewer on all sides. All together they could represent a posse. A tribunal, even. The viewer is the questioner of art, by rights. In Baker’s gallery display, the role of interrogator is called into question. Who or what is out of place here?

Ordinarily, woods are the backdrop for wildlife. Baker’s animals stand as gatekeepers to brick and mortar additions to the landscape. These manmade landmarks have nothing to do with the land except that they occupy it. The animals have everything to do with the land *because* they occupy it. A blue heron stalks the Memorial Coliseum. Inquisitive rodents pause before the Bronson gate of the Paramount Pictures lot. A red-tail hawk watches over the Van Nuys Drive In movie theater. A bat flits over the Hollywood Bowl. All look completely at home, which leads to another query for the members of the inquest. Who or what is the trespasser in these cases?

Baker is not interested in creating a 3D world or a realistic portrayal of the various creatures that inhabit her works. Her mostly primary colors lie perfectly flat. Animals and buildings coexist on a single plane. Her birds and beasts have identifiable personalities, and her painting style is reminiscent of picture book illustration, but there is no nod to Disney, no anthropomorphism. The artist has not coopted animal identity. Each example of wildlife is presented at a distance from the human construction it is paired with. Whether it’s a safe distance or not is debatable. The viewer is at an even greater distance from these proofs of human involvement, and their safety is equally in question, with a wild creature standing in the way of a return to familiar ground. There’s evidence of a human presence, but no people in sight. The viewer may be the only human survivor in the wake of some pernicious catastrophe, perhaps, some form of pestilence that only undomesticated life has survived. Spared, as it were, because it exists outside the influence of human interference.

Fontenot’s oil paintings of white men in distress are an archipelago of injury in a sea of gallery whitewash. Painstakingly and realistically depicted with formidable precision, most of the

artist's impeccably painted miniatures are so small that the viewer must lean forward to see them. Getting up close and personal with the subject matter at hand is an intimate situation all around. The subjects of these portraits are as unprotected as can be. Their skin is exposed, as is their inherent weakness. Initially, they elicit pity, and pathos. Sympathy first, then suspicion.

There's conversation between the viewer and the viewed, but no sense of community. Each of these wounded men exists in an impenetrable isolation. Bleeding, in repose. Resigned to suffer forever. Several of the subjects are Hollywood actors, men of general privilege portraying men of specific privilege. And there's a familiarity about the bodily damage on hand partly due to overused Hollywood makeup effects. In most cases, there has been some form of violent altercation. We see evidence of apparent gunshots. Stabbings. Blunt-force trauma. The injuries have been inflicted by a phantom assailant. A paltry few of the casualties have been bandaged or otherwise cared for. The providers of this medical attention are as anonymous as their assailants. Have these men been hunted? Or simply targeted by the artist? With their relentless fascination with exposed, defenseless flesh, the images hint at a J. G. Ballard-esque damage fetish, and Sacher-Masoch would surely respond to them in an appreciative way.

Despite their weakened conditions, Fontenot's wounded men don't seem the slightest bit vulnerable. On the contrary. They come off as indestructible. Rarely do they make eye contact with the viewer, but it doesn't seem due to any sense of modesty or shame. It just appears they have no interest in any connection outside the range of their personal torment. They are wholly consumed by their damaged self-identity.

Historically and culturally, white men have posed a continual affront to members of society outside their kind. Emphatically or not, the subjects of Fontenot's portraits are representative of the ruling class that has remained virtually unchanged since time immemorial. To atone, it seems, his men must continually suffer. Frozen in paint, their anguish has no beginning and no end. Their wounds are self-renewing badges of toxic machismo, always fresh, never healing. They have no speech. Bleeding is their primary form of communication. Getting something on the inside out.

More often than not, the subjects of Fontenot's portraits are the same kind of people that built the presently lifeless structures in the backgrounds of Baker's animal paintings. The paintings hang on the walls of a room apart from the one where Baker stages her settings. Behind the scenes, as it were. In one space, nature. In the other, human nature. No longer a whole concept. Clearly a dichotomy. The viewer stands in the center of both, a threat no longer. The damage has been done. The price has been levied. The debt is left to empty institutions. In "Predators and Other LA Stories" and "We Have Little Lives," we are presented with what has survived.

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