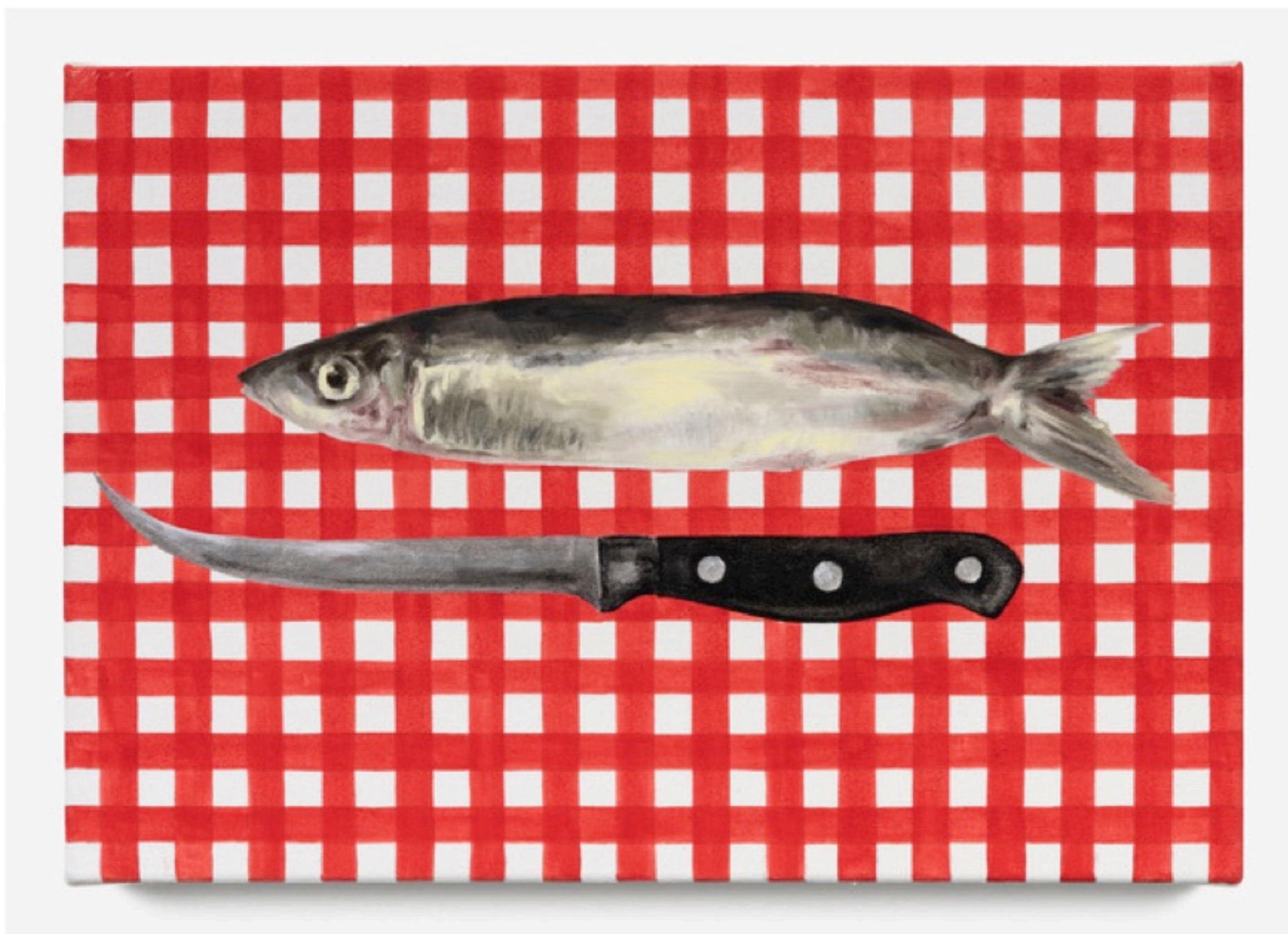


ABATTOIR



STORIES: NEW NARRATIVES, AT ABATTOIR

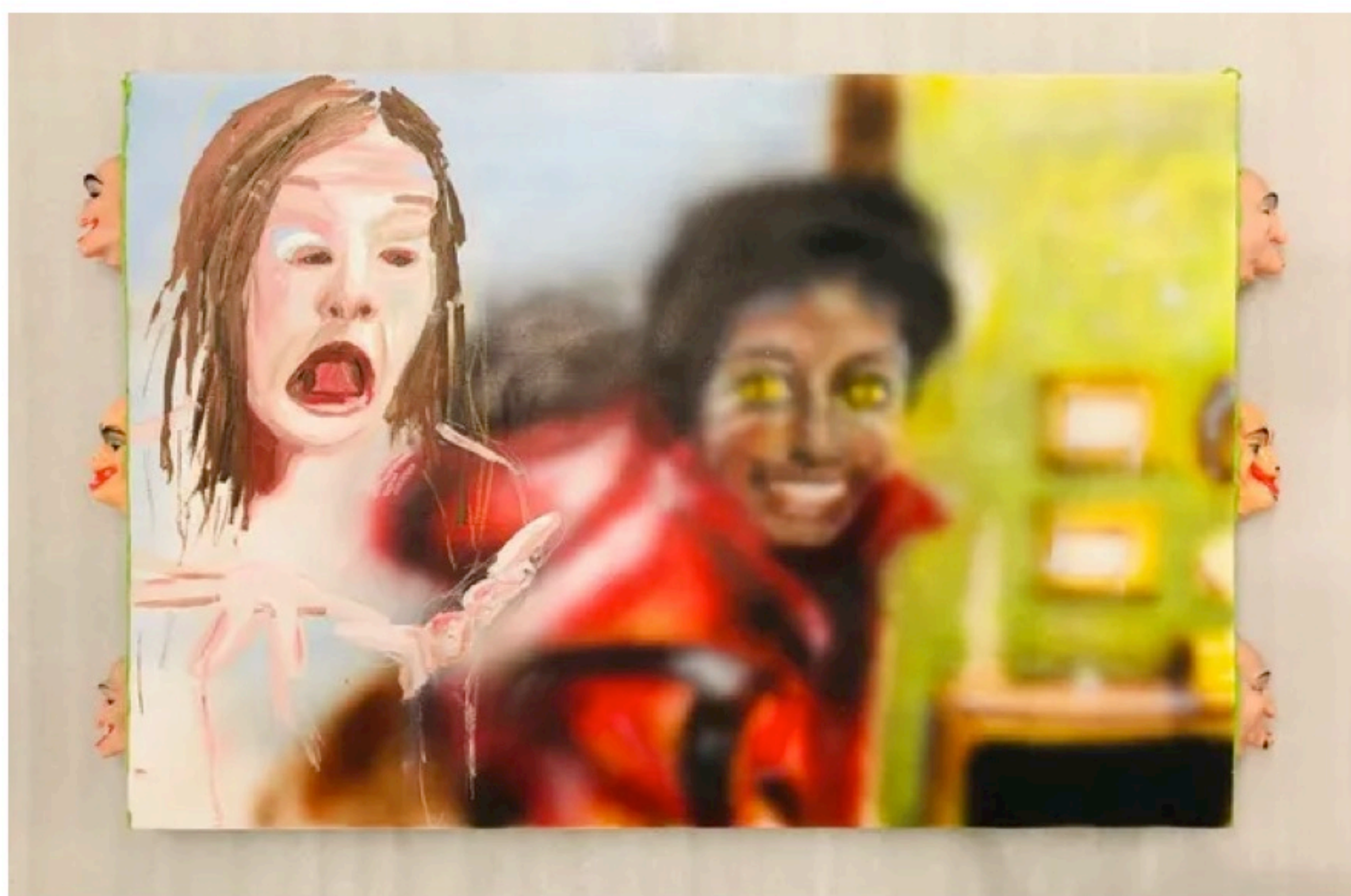
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Katie Butler, *Sardine*. Image: Field Studio, courtesy of Abattoir Gallery.

New Narratives at [Abattoir Gallery](#) offers an intriguing selection of strongly conceived new paintings by six exciting new artists. Deftly curated by Lisa Kurzner and Rose Burlingham, the nominally representational works operate fluidly, switching between currents of traditional pictorial practices and more distanced, conceptual approaches. The six young artists (four from the Cleveland area, two from Chicago) each contribute several paintings, touching on widely different (though all politically inflected) subjects, employing a range of styles and materials which somehow harmonize on Abattoir's walls. Even without knowing these artists or reading their bios, it might be clear that they share the technology-steeped, issue-savvy perspective of their cohort, communicated in part through time-travelling visual quotations (like Antoine Washington's Polaroid-inspired family snapshot painting). Remarkably fresh and free, these works nevertheless deal with some of the anxiety and endemic vertigo of contemporary life. It's also a quick seminar on the possibilities of representational, quasi-narrative painting in the age of sampling and mashup, an era when "artist" usually means "musician."

Erykah Townsend is particularly impressive here. A native Cleveland, this recent CIA, graduate is scheduled to exhibit her mixed media works at MOCA next year – an enviable level of early recognition. Her website includes series of works that explore the nature of identity and reality as she samples first- and second-string pop figures ranging from Leonard Nimoy's Star trek personae to Big Bird's alter ego, long-time puppeteer Carroll Spinney. Also on her website, www.milkcrate.studio, we find this statement attributed to Kyle Broflovski (a very smart toon on South Park): "Townsend believes that some fictional characters and icons are so embedded in pop culture that they take place in the real world." With a screen in almost every handbag, car, and pocket, it's hard to deny the omnipresence of fiction in our late late modern world/show.



Erykah Townsend, Look mom, I'm a woman now!, 2021, acrylic, airbrush on panel, with toy witch faces, 24 x 36 inches. Image: Field Studio, courtesy of Abattoir Gallery

Many of Townsend's attitudes and concerns are covered in her outstanding 2021 painting "Look Mom, I'm a woman now," which frankensteins together scenes from two seminal cinematic/video moments of coming-of-age trauma—Brian D Palma's 1976 classic "Carrie," and Michael Jackson's 1983 "Thriller." Townsend paints a pale pink Sissy Spacek-like Carrie lifted from the movie's shower scene, where her precarious teenage self-understanding and embarrassment explodes in catastrophic denial. She gapes in horror at her hands, dripping as they emerge from a reddish mist. Her face and hair are rendered in a crisp anecdotal manner, using acrylic paint, but the rest of the work is just the opposite, hovering in a soft airbrush blur. The peak moment of realization represented by Carrie's face and hands as she is confronted with her menarche gives way abruptly to the lure and terror of dream. Just behind her, beckoning beyond the blood mist is the demonic figure portrayed by Michael Jackson in "Thriller". In that Jekyll and Hyde saga of a hot date gone wrong, then right, then wrong, the violence and power underlying sexual urges recurs like a heavy, ancient backbeat. Townsend's painting is like a gateway to the Id.

Next to it hang two smaller paintings by Chicago artist Herman Aguirre. Each is titled "Gesto" ("Gesture") and shows a head, thrown back so that a receding perspective gives a sense of movement into the depths of the surface. Aguirre describes his materials as "oil skins" and oil on canvas, meaning that these works are in part stuck together, modeled, from patches of dried paint, peeled from palette or tube and used to physically construct (as much as paint) the faces we see. A few other modernist painters have worked somewhat this way, among them the extraordinary School of London artist Frank Auerbach. Aguirre, who currently teaches painting and drawing at the Art Institute of Chicago, has exhibited his work at Zolla Lieberman Gallery in Chicago, and also in the one person show "Occultos" (Hidden Things) at Abattoir this past Spring. A Mexican-American from Chicago, Aguirre has shown a number of paintings about drug cartel murders. His work at Abattoir, which is related to that series, is very dark, and explores a further non-visual dimension of texture in painted works. An emerging object-hood happens in these paintings as they move toward sculptural bas-relief, accumulating physical reality by piling on viscous, highly tactile paint residues. This is a different, also highly effective mode of "frankensteining," following a primordial, alchemical-type urge to summon new being from material and process. Since the prints and paintings showing grim realities of war by Francesco Goya in the early years of the nineteenth century, and the 1818 "Severed Heads" unsparingly depicted in an oil study by Théodore Géricault, to the mural-size, grommet-hung canvases depicting CIA torture scenes from the post-Vietnam years rendered in oil, then scraped off with a butcher knife, by the incomparable Chicago artist Leon Golub, ways of working out a materially augmented realism, used most often to evoke political tragedy and criminality, have established an alternate modernist tradition of their own.

Katie Butler is a painter and printmaker who recently obtained her MFA at KSU, using still-life composition as a pretext for her own highly original political/social satire and commentary. Balancing on the sadder side of life-and-death situations, Dead Nature, as the Germans and French bluntly term "Still Life" originated as a bittersweet meditation on the fleeting nature of beauty. Adopted by Symbolist painters like Odilon Redon, it eventually became a vehicle for different types of philosophical or political reflection. Traditionally intimate in terms of both size and subject matter, In Butler's hands the still-life convention often goes quite big. She paints sea creatures and sharp cutlery against patterned tablecloths, which in the 50" X 62" acrylic work "Reaching Across the Aisle" (2021) juggles beauty, overt ideological comment, and form on a shifting platform of compositional motion and balance. Butler paints an orangey-red lobster which, despite its parboiled state appears to reach across two red-and-white and blue-and-white check surfaces, toward a bowl of tempting fruit. Apples have spilled out. There are grapes on a salver. Beside the lobster slants a sharply pointed butcher's knife. The fruit that the lobster wants is on a solidly blue surface. A solid red backs up the tasty ocean spider, and there's butter temptingly displayed there, too. It all begins to make sense. "Yes, the lobster is you-know-who," says Butler, He's watching over the whole show with his beady eyes. Elsewhere on the gallery is a marvelous smaller painting of six sardines, looking crowded, scared, and helpless against a red check pattern. Even smaller, and at least as suggestive of political realities, is the 11" X 17" "Anchovy," depicting one long silver fish, above a boning knife, like a destroyer shadowed by a submarine.



Antwoine Washington, Bought moms and pops a crib, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 inches. Image: Field Studio, courtesy of Abattoir gallery.

Antwoine Washington is a Cleveland-based artist, originally from Detroit, who received his degree in Studio Art from Southern University. Washington is founder of the Museum for Creative Human Art. His quietly compelling work has become familiar to local audiences through shows presented by moCa, the Cleveland Walls mural festival, Artists Archives of the Western Reserve, and other venues. His paintings here are acrylic on canvas. Reminiscent of family snapshots, they show suburban scenes from the life of an African-American family. Washington applies the paint loosely, as if to say the detail isn't the point, it's safely left to memory, or maybe isn't something he wants to remember. The faces also are much-simplified, though distinct and individual. And the events are basic. One is called "Bought moms and pops a new crib" (2021). In that painting a cherry tree is in blossom, and puffs of cloud—suggested by breaks in the all-over screensaver-blue—are scattered across the sky. A young man in a flower patterned shirt stands and smiles next to two people, one pictured from the back, who hug in the driveway of a white clapboard house. Washington is telling us something, or asking us to ask, about truth and lies and middle class American neighborhoods. Nobody wants to talk about a whole lot of things. His are puzzling, even disturbing paintings that almost advocate denial as a medium of inquiry, and they keep you coming back for a closer look. The enlarged, doll-like eyes of the receding line of standing figures in "Family Reunion" (2021) are a little bit like the eyes of Butler's hapless, doomed sea creatures hanging right across from them. And their red and white checked picnic blanket spread on the grass by the Lake is so much like the lobster's checked cloth. The installation at Abattoir is carefully plotted and often thought-provoking. If eyes, whether human or animal, can be, so to speak, the flag of consciousness, of selfhood, here they most often also call attention to the plight of oppressed beings.

Max Markwald is a painter whose often large-scale autobiographical works chronicle the momentous process of his recent gender reassignment. Some of these have been exhibited this past year in a solo show at Bay Arts, and as part of Converge, the groundbreaking, multi-venue exhibit of 71 artists of the LGBTQ community from this region assembled by the Artists Archives of the Western Reserve, which was on view through the summer and early fall of 2021.

Since earning his BFA from the University of Akron a few years ago Markwald has been given twelve solo shows around the Midwest, and has painted many different types of portraits, including a wonderful series of gender-rendering large-scale paintings depicting transmen and others, costumed and made up as the WWII, industrial propaganda archetype Rosie the Riveter.

At Abattoir three smaller self-portraits by Markwald introduce a person with a conventional men's haircut, holding his hands in front of his face in different postures. In a recent interview he talks about enjoying this particular choice for reasons of technique and engagement more than expressive content. In other words, he may be using his hands to cover his face, with the range of possible interpretations that gesture might communicate (fatigue, embarrassment, introspection, sorrow, or great surprise), but just as important is the fact that he's enjoying painting his fingers. They are, indeed, beautifully, fluently painted, forming a cove of vertical flesh where the self quietly resides, or a knotted screen of knuckles and shadows like a wicker gate, speaking of the secrets and complexity of the human mind and heart. Markwald's quietly solid, confident self-portraits learned their lessons in poise and frankness from a whole museum full of masters, from Manet to Lucian Freud. They convey a sense of renewal, a byproduct of his transition, which can be a process of daring and fundamental creative revolution that challenges the individual to rediscover not only himself, but the world.

Omar Velazquez is the other Chicago based artist in "New Narratives." Following the success of his mesmerizing recent show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in that city, he is currently back in Puerto Rico, which is the backdrop and narrative/cultural source of his visual art, and of his music. At Abattoir, in a show full of strikingly original, personally poignant works, his oil and airbrush on canvas "Totem" stands out as an unforgettable image. He speaks about his recent paintings as improvisational – in an almost musical sense, I think, and more ominous than surrealist or magic realist.

Among his several small paintings of native species of Puerto Rico's birds, which suggest individual animals glimpsed between natural freedom and the captivity of human-modified environments, the larger "Totem" is by far the most mysterious and ominous visual statement. In the upper left quadrant of the vertical painting Velazquez depicts a silvery owl with glowing orange eyes. The foreground is divided down the middle by a wooden post, sharply rendered, attached to a forked branch set crookedly across the middle of the canvas, making a kind of cross. This is where the bird perches. A yellow rubber dishwashing glove is fitted over the right hand end of this branch, balancing (or unbalancing) the bird on the left. And then the brisk, clear exposition of realistic elements drops away into the billowing green depths of rain forest and blue mountains beyond, like the soft-focus depth of field in a telephoto birding capture. It's a wry, yet oddly serious, incantation, directed to the Taino ancestors who surely haunt this realm.

The owl, which has an Henri Rousseau-like proto-modernist, quirky menace, might be a personification of eternal irony, while the glove is the slippery-superficial, would-be antiseptic tradition of now, with its serial disasters and pathetic solutions. It also seems to be a fugitive from another Velazquez painting, featured at the MCA exhibit in which a Lysol bottom is stuck sideways on a similar branch.

New Narratives is a show about survivors, about the challenges that face every human being, but also about trauma and its aftermath. These are extraordinary contemporary works, by highly educated younger artists, dealing with helplessness and the persistence of beauty, awash in absurdity, bumping against bad deals made with the devils of human nature. Don't miss it.