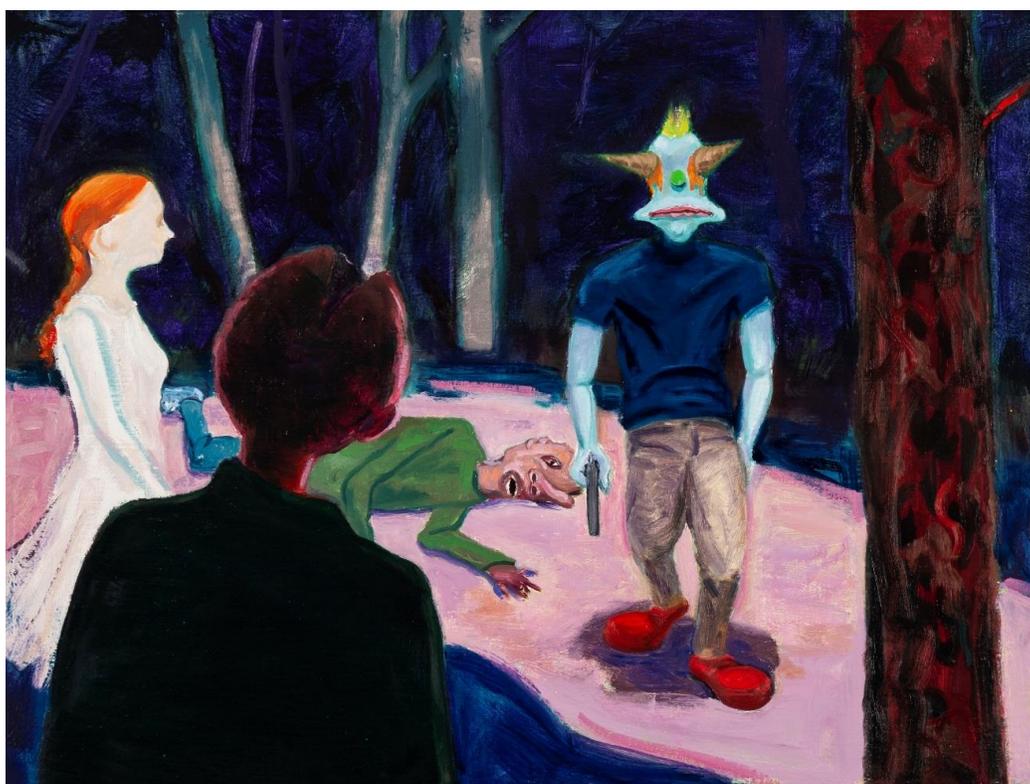


WAKEUP CALL

William Lewis at College of Idaho
(October 25-December 6, 2019)

Introducing “Eveningland”, a hypothetical place sprung from the mind and hand of Boise painter William Lewis, yet in a sense also very real. The name of his latest exhibition may sound pleasant but the message within is not. Lewis’ *Adventures in Eveningland* at the College of Idaho’s Rosenthal Gallery of Art was a powerful commentary on a deeply disturbing political and societal climate in this country that is symptomatic of a nation in moral decline. The work in question addressed and bemoaned a society plagued by hate crimes, random violence, and racism, exacerbated by a lack of national leadership.



Goofing Off, Oil on linen, 18”x 24”, 2019

Lewis is an intriguing, gifted artist whose paintings, prints, and drawings speak to us on multiple levels. He is an intellectual whose art can raise philosophical questions through a provocative and imaginative pictorial vocabulary that triggers our own inquisitive instincts. *Eveningland* is about the existential crises facing us in this time of general anxiety and discontent. Increasingly, he suggests, we are a society in cultural despair. Lewis’ emotional artist statement posed questions that revealed exasperation over our complicity in the indifference that prevails after the moment of outrage passes. The title refers to his metaphor of “dying light,” a twilight zone in which the sun of reason and hope will eventually disappear over the horizon, leaving us in total darkness.

Lewis' 2018 *Acts of Painting* show was overwhelming in terms of scale and forthrightness. This exhibit was of a similar declaratory nature and size but had a different focus. Whereas *Acts* was inspired by his insider experience as an artist working in the solitude of the studio, *Eveningland* moves us outside that personal space, addressing our collective malaise. Both exhibitions showed Lewis ratcheting up the heat in his art.



Adrift, Oil on Canvas, 58"x50, 2019

Lewis' art has always been penetrating and often humorous going back to the days when he instilled human attributes and moods into eccentric renderings of inanimate objects. And this is not the first time he has been drawn to subjects that examine the darker side of our nature. His earlier paintings on the Unabomber terrorist are an example. Given the figures populating *Eveningland*, Lewis could be considered a present-day version of William Hogarth, the 18th century painter who portrayed character types as perpetrators of various social evils by their countenance and life style.

Lewis presented 34 pieces in *Eveningland*, 23 of which were works on paper (plus three ceramics), the rest being oils on linen or canvas. The rendering of the figures at first glance had the look of lampoon illustration where exaggerated features magnify a subject's idiosyncrasies and flaws. But this was not good-humored satire. Rather, Lewis brings us evil incarnate through

the physically deformed, mad miscreants and thugs he places front stage. The faces are masks ranging from caricature to the demonic.

In short, these in-your-face compositions were geared to wake us up. In paintings like *Joy Ride* and *Goofing Off*, Lewis forces the viewer into the role of unwilling witness to prowling-for-victims and murder-for-fun events. The fact that he paints these scenarios in loud, garish hues and stark whites against dark backgrounds only intensifies the craziness, and our discomfort.

My own description of the work on canvas is a combination of the Joker and Hieronymus Bosch. Case in point is *Eveningland's* Joker-esque villain with pasty-white painted face, clown make-up and ice cream cones for eyes. He shows up everywhere, usually with weapon in hand. In *I Scream Eyes* he poses for his portrait in full regalia of gun, runny ice cream eye, et al. Then there were works like *Together*, and *Adrift* depicting figures engaged in cannibalism and spewing their guts. Both paintings were Bosch-like scenes of debauchery.



Joy, Ceramic, 15"x 8"x 8", 2019

There were several character studies that were less threatening but just as striking nonetheless. In the oil on canvas entitled *Morning in America*, a young scout leader in uniform beneath a prominently placed American flag appears blissfully inspired with little, if any, understanding of the troubling events around him. Lewis' swirling brushwork in the face points to this fellow's indoctrination. Then there is the profile portrait *The Great Aunt*. This grim, tight lipped, tightly strung elderly woman made quite an impression as the stereotypical single, childless sister of

your grandfather. Her skin looks stretched back as if the result of multiple facelifts. The pain revealed in her physiognomy and demeanor is palpable. Your heart goes out to her.



Gathering, Pastel on toned paper, 30”x 22”, 2019

Lewis’ small-scale drawings were hung as a gallery of portraits rendered in various media, with many of the subjects being character quotes from the larger oils. Installed along one wall, they collectively read a bit like a lineup of mug shots. Several somewhat bland renderings of male heads seemed almost out of place, raising the question of who or what they’re supposed to portray. Maybe they were us. No matter: any loose ends did not detract from the overall impact. Here, Lewis’ talent for caricature was certainly on display.

In *Adventures in Eveningland* Lewis’ response to his own question, “Where do we find ourselves?” is a call to action and community. The poet Robert Lowell wrote of “the inarticulate mist so thick we turned invisible to one another across the room.” In that vein, Lewis behooves us to step outside ourselves in this matter, recognize the threat to us all, and engage. It is a soul-searching message that should resonate with anyone paying attention.

Christopher Schnoor
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