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All About Luminosity A Review of Watercolor Wisconsin's Fiftieth Anniversary Show at the Racine Art Museum

Edwin Kalke, "The Last Picture Show I," 2015

Watercolor and ink /Photo: Jon Bolton, Racine

RECOMMENDED

Not all pieces in the fiftieth annual Watercolor Wisconsin show are celebrations of a happy, peaceful, prosperous American life, but most of them are and many of those are very good. Limiting the competition to a single medium has allowed for some notion of excellence, even if “watercolor” here includes acrylic, gouache and ink, plus anything else that might be glued or rubbed on top of these media.

In this iteration, Harold E. Hansen is the master of transparent watercolor media. Like

many other participants, he's over fifty, and like several others, he's had professional training and a career in commercial art. His depiction of a stained glass window in an Edinburgh chapel captures its full luminosity. His drawing of its central figure, William Wallace, is possibly even stronger than the original and you're left admiring the artist's virtuosity more than the bravery of the Scottish hero.

By contrast, "Crossing Guard" by Karen Mathis is more about subject matter. It's a cold, snowy street scene filled with the energy of school kids and the adults who protect them. It's impossible not to smile and remember how good winter can feel to a well-loved ten-year-old. Like the majority of the show's other artists, Mathis had training and a career in something other than art, but that did not prevent her from mastering the expressive potential of her media.

Many of the paintings are figureless landscapes, and many of those depict a lonely path into the woods, an obvious metaphor for a solitary journey through life. My favorite among these was painted by Robert Marcella, who took up painting at the tender age of seventy-five. Like several other artists in the show, he grew up on a farm, where possibly he picked up the self-reliance, discipline and hard work that carried him to achievement much later in life.

Watercolor painting is all about luminosity. Shining up from the whiteness of the paper beneath, it's as furtive as daylight when the sun crosses the sky and breaks through the clouds. The naturalistic landscapes of Alice Struck and Linda Gerard Dzik capture that

moment. The expressionist landscapes of Bruce Boeck and Kathleen Nelson reveal the inner light of spiritual awareness. Sue Wolff's still life of a glass vase is as glistening and prism-like as glass itself.

Alice Rossman, "Lyric," 2016. Transparent watercolor /Photo: Jon Bolton

Many of these paintings depict a world of over stimulation: too much strong color, too many things, too much random energy; possibly the consequence of that daily barrage of commercial advertisement and entertainment that assaults contemporary American life. There is little sense of majesty or wildness in the landscapes, strong character in the portraits or quiet meditation in the still lifes. There are no nudes of any kind and few suggestions of the social issues that led to the recent, calamitous election.

The show reflects a world that may be too comfortable, shallow and limited for some. But the ability to enjoy life, and share that enjoyment, should never be taken for granted.
(Chris Miller)

"Watercolor Wisconsin 2016" shows through April 22 at the Racine Art Museum, 441 Main Street, Racine.

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