

Duality, dream space, and determination on view

Cate McQuaid, Boston Globe, December 15, 2015

Artists have a way of investing what they make with meaning, but painter Michael Krueger, in his show at Steven Zevitas Gallery, has as much to say about meaninglessness, and the dualism between the two.

In the past, he painted hallucinatory narratives extruded from iconic American touchstones such as the Wild West, in which vulnerable little figures — neither white hats nor black hats — confronted seething and patterned landscapes.



Here, Krueger leaves history and society behind for the irrational utterances of his own mind. He paints images that arise while he's meditating, which is like giving form to the absurd and loopy thoughts that surface as you fall asleep. Such phantasms might be keys to unlocking great mysteries. Then again, they might just be senseless chatter.

He packs these works with humor and earnest attentiveness. He doesn't use a brush, but with stencils, airbrush, screenprinting, and more, makes very unpainterly paintings that stand in a tenuous realm between image and object — thrusting us into another dichotomous gulf.

"Flame," for instance, piles three flame-shaped blocks, one protruding from the next in gray, orange, and aqua, atop a linen canvas with a slinking, shadowy ground of black and purple. The electric colors play with the eye, while the 3-D flame flies in the face of our expectations of fire's intangible essence.

It's clumsy, yet clever. Krueger's paintings riddle us in ways similar to Zen koans, which seek to upend meaning and strip down our habits of thinking to reveal the world anew.

"Rose" sets two canvases back to back, each paint-stamped with wood grain. Krueger tops the freestanding piece with a handle; it looks like a briefcase. A tattoo-like rose floats on one face. What is it? A painting, a carry-on, a sentimental token?

It's an artwork — we expect it to signify something. Yet perhaps it's just a figment made flesh. Krueger invites us to step into the space between meaning and meaninglessness, and it's hard to be there. We so want to pass judgment, rather than linger in frightening, dynamic uncertainty.