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Heat stroke: Taunton opens windows

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by Laura Parsons



Tim Taunton, “War Child.”

Big sky—that’s what has stayed with me from the short time I lived in New Mexico. The blueness seemed to go on forever as the intense sun lit up the desert landscape. Sometimes it was so bright my head would hurt—the sky and earth were exotic and almost unreal compared to the blah Chicago winter I’d left behind.

It’s a sensation Tim Taunton captures perfectly in the seven paintings displayed in the exhibition, “Through the Looking Glass,” on view at Migration: A Gallery. Better known as a ceramist, Taunton paints previously sculpted figures into western landscapes, where they take part in mysterious stories unfolding beneath searing blue skies.

Taunton offers only glimpses of these narratives, though. Surrounding his oil-glaze-on-board works with frames that resemble white stucco windows— complete with small sills— he orients viewers so that they are inside looking out. What’s seen is a truncated version of events happening beyond the window, where shadows, architectural fragments, and items scattered on the ground offer tantalizing clues for viewers to piece together.

The only exception to this positioning is “War Child,” which has viewers first look across a room— where a TV-watching boy in an army helmet sits cross-legged amid toy soldiers— before peering out the window to a bare-chested, and helmeted figure standing astride a hobby horse in the bright day. Like all of Taunton’s works, the image vacillates between realism and surrealism, presenting a world at once familiar and alien.

Taunton’s compositions are not large, and sky fills much of each frame. The figures and details conveying narrative information are tiny yet precisely rendered, as if painted with the single-bristled brushes used by ancient Indian miniaturists. His palette, for the most part, is richly saturated—from the terracotta of the desert earth to the cerulean blue of the sky—and he uses colors to create subtle relationships between elements.

Although Taunton never veers into full-blown surrealism, the influence of Salvador Dali is evident, particularly in the image “Le Revenant.” Here a Dali-faced harlequin holds up an egg (ala Dali’s “The Metamorphosis of Narcissus”) while kneeling on a dry lakebed by a Dali-esque reflective body of water. Architectural ruins loom in the distance, while closer, a fire-breather walks on stilts behind two circus tents on the right.

Evoking the kind of waking dreams brought on by sun-induced delirium, Taunton's paintings are as brilliant as they are bright. Tim Taunton's exhibition, "Through the Looking Glass," is on view through November 30 at Migration: A Gallery. 119 5th St. SE. 293-2200.