

Origin Stories.

A review of Frank J. Stockton's solo exhibit at the Samuel Freeman Gallery.

By Daphne Rozenblatt

The founding mythologies of almost every civilization are brutal. Gods are fallible, heroes often accidental, and destiny a nihilistic curse upon ignorant mortals and omniscient deities alike. But the fatal flaws of sadists, rapists, tricksters, and murderers striving for greatness lead to metamorphosis. As Ovid would have it, those personas fall instead of rising up the great chain of being. They devolve into lesser but everlasting beings, sometimes descending into hell itself.

That pathos at the heart of the origins of human story telling is what Frank J. Stockton captures in his first solo exhibit, "True Believers." It is that same pathos that has fueled much of biblical exegesis, the eternal repetition and reincarnation of ancient near- and middle-eastern and Greek myths, and more recent inquiries into Freudian civilization and its discontents.

To describe Stockton's work as narrative is to reiterate the deceptive simplicity of his palate. His cool green-blue echoes the tiled walls of insane asylums meant to calm patients. A jilted blue or subtle peach sometimes accentuate and, in other cases, neutralize the gleam of his anything-but-warm bright red.

With similar subtlety and complexity, each painting deconstructs the story as sequential art in at least three ways. At the surface, a figure—human, house, or plant—takes center stage in a wash of teal and a shock of crimson. But as our gaze passes over the contortions of setting, scribble, and form, we find the details of cigarette butts, a shoelace, skull, palm tree, and banana that mark the narrative's twists and turns. Then we absorb a variety of sometimes belabored, often pensive, and always determined brush strokes that tell a psychological story of the follies of modern masculinity. Stockton's heroes are buffoons, anti-heroes, strongmen, and dandies, trouncing the moral limpidness of contemporary superheroes with one fell swoop of a brush-wielding hand. The details of a caped figure's face would be redundant: the paint in motion—as emotion—tells all.

Passing clockwise and counter-clockwise through the Samuel Freeman Gallery tells two more stories. The one begins with the domestic simplicity of a household plant and American dream staple of the single family home with prairie acreage to boot. It takes a soldier's march toward the loss of innocence and the strength to destroy, and the rescue of a damsel in distress reaps the rewards of the flesh. But in the end, the sedated and sedentary life awaits our hero, the anticlimactic happy ending haunts every overly successful victor.

Contrarily, one begins with twenty-first-century American everyman, who trades his self-contented and farcical middle-class settling for a walk down the Übermensch's road of failed promises and corrupted dreams. He pursues outdated notions of gendered heroism in which triumph is indiscernible from terror.

Superhuman alter egos threaten civilization and the architectural fabric of mundane America is nearly blown away in one unsettling earthy sweep. The metamorphosis is complete and our Untermensch hangs in homely stupor as the suspended potted plant.

And this is why Stockton's most recent work should be taken seriously: it neither asks a single question nor gives a single answer. Stylistically, the vulnerability and invulnerability of Stockton's ambiguous true believer is born out of the tender embrace of both "high" and "low" art. The work simultaneously plays with both the material experience of American abstract paint as well as the bubbly curve of a face or breasts, a bobbling phallus, or a cat's comical eyes. With unsettling familiarity, the experience of Stockton's exhibit is both vitriolic and jolly, whimsical and derisive, inviting and uncanny. The subversive title, "True Believers," represents the text of Stockton's work, indicting American narrative exceptionalism captured by superhero culture as it has evolved through the perils of the twentieth century. But its subtext goes a step further, capturing the thinly but brightly veneered emotional corruptions and contradictions of our male ideals. Stockton paints the modern tragedy in which we laugh and break at the same time. This superman's wounds are invisible, and from his pain modern civilization—like a second-generation god—is born. His journey conveys a beauty, a terrible and human beauty, that is ours and ours alone.