

Ghost Town

As any good horror story demonstrates, there are consequences to reanimating the dead. Or at least, there should be. Ghosts, zombies, vampires and other creatures from the realm of the beyond have earned their Uncanny badges in part because they take the form of someone who was once recognizably human, coursing with blood and feeling. Yet not for a moment can such creatures be mistaken for the people they once were. The apparition hovering in the mist may look a little like grandpa, the psychic may give voice to a dead aunt's cherished childhood memories, the vampire inevitably wears stylish street clothes, but there is something fundamentally wrong with all of them: they are not who they appear to be. Despite all this our culture remains fascinated with ghost stories and other tales of the undead, because we want to know what these strange new/old creatures know. We want to believe.

In many ways, Andreas Fischer's recent paintings can be understood as ghost stories told with paint. Each of his works attempts to represent imaginative experiences that cannot be conveyed linguistically, often by taking the form of something they are not, be it a faded archival photograph or a snapshot of a picturesque Montana landscape. Using paint to weave together the factual and the ineffable, Fischer provides us with information that cannot be confirmed by a source outside of the painting: meaning must be intuited via the paint itself. Fischer's concurrent exhibitions at the Hyde Park Art Center and the Gahlberg Gallery at the College of Du Page consist of two separate but conceptually related groups of paintings: the first, titled *Original Location*, is a series of landscapes depicting various Montana settings, the second, titled *Sunday Best*, consists of portraits based on found tintype (also known as ferrotype) images of anonymous individuals dressed in 19th century-style attire.

Fischer draws on metaphors of historiography and the archive to explain how these two bodies of work relate to one another:

“History often gets represented through a collection of fragments or an archive and it has been argued that what is important in archives is what is left out - what can't be represented factually, actual experience in other words. Both parts of "Ghost Town" attempt to use painting to address this absence. Through material facts of paint these bodies of

images attempt to extend beyond basic linguistic representation into broader experience.

“Both bodies of work are meant to mimic kinds of historical fragments. They pretend to document. More importantly, though, they attempt to use paint activity to tap into imaginative characteristics that make up subjective experience.”

No matter what form history takes, there will always be aspects of experience that are omitted from the official narratives because they don't fit the trajectory or are considered irrelevant. Fischer wants to figuratively gather up these stray parts, these shadow stories, and use them as the inspiration for paintings that are in no way historical and yet rely on the suggestive power of historical fragments to make meaning. No doubt there is something vaguely Frankensteinian in Fischer's attempts to assemble images of human beings from bits and parts. (The same could be said of the historian's efforts to construct historical narratives out of disparate archival materials).

The personal and historical identities of the individuals in Fischer's portraits have eroded over time. Backgrounds composed of bright blue, garish orange or lime green appear to hold these subjects in place while also gnawing away at their outlines, so that both the figure and ground appear to be disintegrating before our eyes. These people are an unsettling combination of living character and dead thing. The ruddiness of skin is conveyed through mottled strokes of pink, grey and green, giving some of the figures a distinctly Zombie-like appearance. So too do their eyes, which Fischer often conveys with a few strokes of brown or black so that the sockets appear as gaping hollows. A single curved brushstroke may evoke a pair of pursed lips, a slackened jaw or other facial grimace that hints at a quality that is somehow essential to the character, and yet other areas of the composition will be more crudely evoked or purposefully under-developed, thereby breaking the illusion of coherency and referring us back to the raw materiality of paint as a representational device.

We have the distinct sense that these individuals are posing for a photographer rather than a portrait painter. The unintentional facial grimaces, the momentary twitch or droop of an eyelid – these are all imperfections which most portrait painters would take care to erase but which the photographer has no choice but to record. Fischer's paint

applications also mimic the visual cloudiness and surface discolorations of unretouched tintypes. He is especially skillful when using paint to capture the apparitional qualities of the wet plate process, in which certain elements appear hazy or obscure while others seem preternaturally sharp. As Fischer explains, “there is a partial purging of original context and then a re-creation” of it. “The older referent [the subject of the tintype] is pushed away by paint and through its suggestive possibilities paint helps to invent a newer character.”

This exhibition catalogue contains a historical account of Bannack, Montana written by Kathy Weiser. Bannack was a territory that thrived for a few brief years during the gold rush era and is now a ghost town. Populated by outlaw gangs, a crooked sheriff, a prison escapee-turned saloon proprietor, and a schoolteacher named Lucia Darling (have you any doubts she was young and pretty?), Bannack’s brief but tumultuous history is animated by the reader’s imagination. How can we not be tempted to construct dramatic plotlines for these people beyond the sketchy details that history has provided? So too may we wish to invest Fischer’s characters with qualities that exceed the boundaries of the canvas. The Sunday Best characters are all of a type that could have lived in Bannack, although Fischer’s paintings are not, in fact, portraits of Bannack residents. But couldn’t they be? Like the now-defunct HBO series *Deadwood*, which presented a heavily fictionalized version of real historical events that took place during the Gold Rush era in the Black Hills of South Dakota, the characters in Fischer’s paintings serve as vessels for imaginative projection. In this context, Weiser’s account of Bannack, Montana reads as fiction, a rollicking ghost story that provides an interpretive framework from which Fischer’s spectral figures can emerge as more fully human.

Functioning in a somewhat analogous fashion to the portraits are the landscapes from Fischer’s *Original Location* series. Ranging from picturesque mountains and lakes to nondescript wooded areas seen as if through the window of a passing car, these sites are as anonymous as the subjects of Fischer’s portraits. Yet they also seem strangely familiar. Try Googling the words “Montana landscape” and you’ll find any number of images that could have provided the ‘original locations’ for these paintings. All the elements are there: the big sky, the snow covered mountains, the lake and its fragmented reflections of surrounding trees and grass. Yet Fischer’s landscapes disrupt classical notions of the vista by using paint in a loosely signifying manner. White paint applied in a few jagged strokes evokes snow

on a mountainside, the paint applied so thickly it at times appears as an attempted erasure. In one painting, the craggy face of a tree-studded mountainside appears to be sliding downwards, as if the earth, trees, and rocks were slipping off the mountain's surface like so much dripping paint.

In this way Fischer's paintings can be seen as working against themselves. But in using paint as a disruptive device to undercut the work's representational functions, Fischer risks making paintings that are merely incoherent or inert. Either the painting succeeds at capturing something distinctive about its subject or the whole thing falls apart. Perversely, Fischer strives to make paintings that manifest both of these outcomes. And this is where things get tricky. Because, of course, when you attempt to reanimate the dead you may inadvertently wind up with something that's less like a friendly ghost and more like a mindless zombie. So how can the artist enable these ghosts, these mottled amalgams of paint, to communicate on their own terms without putting words into their mouths? For Fischer the answer is to let paint do the work of intuition. "I want the paint to have a range of ways it can behave outside of linguistic representation," he explains. "There's something about the way a mark is made that is an opening up, a complication that produces something else." Fischer insists that he doesn't need to know ahead of time exactly what that mark will produce. He has faith that, if handled properly, paint will communicate something of value. He believes.