



A Question & Answer Session with Artist Kerra Taylor

March 7, 2018

By: Dr. Joni Hand

Artist Kerra Taylor presented a solo exhibition of paintings to the Arts Council of Southeast Missouri Gallery titled, "The Falsehood of Memories." The exhibit remained on display from March 3 – 31, 2018. In an interview by Dr. Joni Hand, Assistant Professor of Art History at Southeast Missouri State University, the artist discusses the context of her work, including recurring characters and themes, as well as her technical process and artist influences.

Joni Hand: There is a surreal quality about your imagery, which transports the narrative to an almost metaphysical place. Is this characteristic of your work part of the filling in of the gaps in the narrative that you mention in your artist statement?

Kerra Taylor: That's a tough question. You are referring to a quote out of my artist statement, "A (narrative) painting... functions more like a single scene from the story rather than the whole story. When we take a scene out of context, we are left to fill in the gaps." This simply means that I am only able to paint one scene at a time, and that one scene can't give you all the answers to the story. You, as the viewer, have to think about what led up to the events and what came after. The "gaps" are the viewer's interpretation of the story. The metaphysical place, in which you refer, is simply embellished facts alluding to a space in which the story takes place. Is the reality or place in the painting possible? Or, is it so weird, it can't possibly be true?

JH: The title of your exhibition is "The Falsehood of Memories". Could you speak a little about memories and how they are morphed or manipulated in your imagery?

KT: When I first take photos of my family, those photos are based on true events. However, after I've manipulated the photos in Photoshop, they become entirely different memories or experiences. They become embellished, faked, and quite extraordinary. For example, in "Meandering Through the Woods," I grew up out in the country surrounded [by] woods – but I don't own pigs, nor does my husband know how to play the flute. Also, it's hidden in the painting, but I've never discovered a T-rex exposed in an embankment, but I did collect small fossils when I was younger. In "Have You Heard the One About..." Bigfoot is a mythological creature, but it's not beyond the realm to sit around a campfire telling ghost stories. I haven't been camping since I was a little girl, but for that photo shoot, we did set up lawn chairs around a campfire at night. In "We Interrupt This Program," my in-laws are in a space that connotes the love of food, but it would not be uncommon for a tornado to interrupt their Midwestern home. I am absolutely terrified of tornadoes. It's about memories in my paintings, but it's also about our personalities and quirks.

JH: Animals are a common motif in your work. How do they fit into the narrative structures you create?

KT: I grew up on what I consider to be a small farm with chickens, geese, rabbits, and other small animals. It's part of my upbringing. I sold one painting that illustrates this idea more clearly, "Gather Around My Children." It can be found on my website. I am an animal lover at heart. While some of my paintings appear happy, satirical, or tragic, animals always seem so innocent and playful. They feel like a necessary element of surprise. Sometimes people can be predictable whereas animals are random.

JH: Can you describe your process? How do you begin to compose a painting?

KT: My process almost feels theatrical because when I take photos of my family, I direct them on where to stand, how to pose, suggest to them what to wear, and I consider the environment, time of day, and props. After the photo shoot, I go into Photoshop and digitally alter the space such as changing the background [and] lighting, and I add in more props. I find many of my resources online. Once I am done with this process, I print off the photo and build a canvas according to the dimensions of the photo. I grid both the photo and canvas to convert the same composition to the canvas. Lastly, I paint from my photo. It's a lengthy process. Most of my paintings take a couple of months to complete. Sometimes – midway – I find that I dislike the original composition and will paint over an area until [I] resolve it.

JH: What do you want your audience to gain from your work?

KT: The large scale of my work reinforces that these stories are milestones worth commemorating. The paintings feel like epic events. The 5' x 6' canvases invite viewers into the scenes as witnesses to the events. In order to visually communicate these scenarios, I paint in a representational manner. Working in traditional oil medium, my technique is a means to convince my viewers that the given space alludes to a reality. My paintings understand that it is in our nature to second-guess "the facts" of what is or isn't real. They question how far would one go to stretch the truth. Each painting functions more like a single scene from a story rather than the whole. None of the paintings are related or follow consecutive order, however, I use the same family members as my models. When we take a scene out of context, we are left to fill in the gaps. For every person, for every story – their interpretation of the scene will be unique. In this manner, I allow room for the viewer to enter into my paintings and complete the stories with their own past experiences.

JH: What advice would you give to younger artists?

KT: I am currently a Per-Course Instructor at Missouri State University. No matter what class I teach, I always want to instill in my students the value of hard work and perseverance. Through countless hours of practice, a student can only grow, but a student must be open to constructive feedback. I see the potential in students, and I want them to see that same enthusiasm. Also, in my opinion, students do not do enough research. I give them assignments that require them to do research. Everybody wants to be original these days, but everything is borrowed in this age. The sooner a student can understand where their inspiration comes from, how it relates to other artists' processes, the sooner they will find their own voice and style.

JH: How does the work you are producing now differ from your earlier paintings?

KT: A lot of my older paintings can be found on my website to illustrate how my work has changed. I've gone through many series that have investigated different ideas about "home". In undergrad, I painted old decrepit houses as an embodiment of the soul and I made replica sculptures of the houses as the vessels. I saw the human condition in the old houses: we are born into the world; we age, and then cease to exist. My work then shifted to self-portraits with me carrying around a cardboard shaped-house – a commentary on how we carry the weight of "home" everywhere with us. I also questioned what it means to be a woman today and my place within [the] home. I felt that neither body of work really addressed what I needed, and graduate school helped me develop those ideas. I lacked happy, more memorable memories with my family that my newer work provides with the narratives. I feel

these paintings are necessary. I was a very lonely child growing up with two working parents, in which the paintings give me a venue to belong to a life worth celebrating.

JH: Which artists influence your work?

KT: In my research, I read books such as the *Renegade Regionalists*, *American Gothic, Narrative and the Consciousness*, and *The Identity of the American West* to help me formalize my identity. I also read books that specifically address the ideas of home and place such as Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place* and *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values* and Wendel Berry's *Standing by Words and People, Land, and Community*. I also read fairytales that helped spark my ideas for how to create settings, props, and characters. Finally, I look up artists that are not necessarily dealing with my same themes, but I carefully study their mediums, techniques, and concepts. Just to name a few: Andrew Wyeth, Edward Hopper, Jonathan Wateridge, Nicholas Poussin, Joseph Wright of Derby, Petrus van Schendel, Jeremy Gedds, Amy Bennett, Andrea Kowch, Pamela Wilson, Haley Hasler, and Adam Miller. My artist list grows every day.

For more 'Let's Talk Arts' Interviews, visit: www.capearts.org/LetsTalkArts.aspx

For more information on Kerra Taylor, visit: www.kerrataylor.com