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[Arts Lead](#)

Lost and Found In Space

Faris McReynolds Dusts Off the '70s At Shaheen Modern and Contemporary

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Sight Unseen/Faris McReynolds

Sat, Jan 20th Through Fri, Mar 16th

Shaheen Modern and Contemporary Art

TV programming has been leaking into outer space from Planet America for decades. Images from classic episodes of Kojak, Hawaii Five-0 and The Love Boat have had time to travel 30 light years and more, informing any intelligent life forms that may be out there of humanity's aspirations and achievements. Even the late Anna Nicole's 2002 reality show has just about made it to Proxima Centauri, our nearest stellar neighbor, by now.

If you find this thought almost too discouraging to bear, imagine Faris McReynold's watercolor studies instead. They're based on archival stills from 1970s programs like The Mod Squad, and it's tempting to think of these blurred, blotchy scenes as the survivors of a journey toward the galactic core. At any rate, they look like they've been through a lot, and the process has definitely improved their intellectual provenance.

There's an endearing impressionist or post-impressionist quality about McReynold's small-scale works at Shaheen, almost as if Eduard Vuillard had dashed them off while watching reruns. But of course, the only reruns in Vuillard's day were the repeating visual patterns of the early 20th century



"THE SOCIAL" Acrylic, watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 2006



"THE PROP" Acrylic, watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 2006

Parisian scene. McReynold's subject matter (where it can be clearly discerned) is another matter entirely, taking us back to a kind of future-perfect tense of painting. His procedural loop revisits comic and dramatic events in a world that never actually existed. Somehow he triumphs over this inbred process, delivering truly engrossing scenarios based on the carefully choreographed tableaux of action dramas.

Some of these are funny, like "The Help," where McReynolds reproduces an anonymous slapstick duel in an old-style Chinese laundry between an iron-wielding man clad in a black robe and skull cap, and a karate guy in a Santa suit. Sheets are stacked neatly on shelves in the background, and another figure watches the action impassively, as the scene snaps in and out of focus in a masterly myopic haze of acrylic and gouache. Or there's "Red Boat," which shows a car awash up to its hubcaps in a shallow, rapidly flowing river. A highway bridge can be seen along the top of the frame; at once we recognize this little disaster as the culminating shot in a chase sequence, just as "The Help" cues memories of Peter Sellers and the comedy of his era. The car appears to be empty — nothing obstructs our view of the blue waters through its windows. Why is the scene so evocative of pathos and futility in general? It seems like a brilliant choice, somehow, but really, why isn't it just stupid? McReynolds elicits a wide range of responses, from annoyance to engagement, partly through his acute selection of images, and more generally, by pushing our buttons (in one way or another, TV is all about us, and it's hard not to be ambivalent about it), but also because he allows himself a considerable range of stylistic reference. "Red Boat," for instance, resembles folk art more than anything, though it's hard to seriously pin any style on McReynolds — nothing sticks.

Some observers consider the Dallas-born, Los Angeles-based artist who turns 30 this year to be one of the hottest younger artists on the LA scene. He's had solo shows in hip galleries in Tokyo and Berlin as well as LA and New York, often displaying large-scale paintings very different in technique and tone from those on view at Shaheen. If there's any consistent theme in his work over the past few years it might be his interest in the psychology of space, particularly interior space. One large 2002 acrylic and pencil work titled "The Argument," shown at Marvelli Gallery in New York, for example, depicts an ultra-simple modernist interior. The room is bare of furniture except for a futon, but paintings slant down a long wall on the left. Everything is indicated in the lightest of lines and washes, but a jerky, fractal-ish red shape seems to be emerging from one of the paintings, moving threateningly toward the empty futon. Or from the same period, his eight-foot-tall "Untitled (Room)" is quite a bit like a sanitized, screen-print-looking Vuillard, all wallpaper stripes and coverlet patterns. McReynolds paints a bed and a chest of drawers, and two windows on the upper right, admitting two shafts of pale sunlight. It could be titled "Stripes and Souls" (except that would be too corny for this artist), as it seems to imagine the translation of ordinary things, speaking of eternity when we least expect it. His watercolor studies also sketch spiritual aspects of three-dimensional space, but as meditations on the 3D illusions specific to the TV screen. There's a fishbowl quality to McReynolds' works at Shaheen that addresses the captive, untouchable nature of his source material.

The title of the exhibit is Sight Unseen, meaning presumably that nobody ever really witnessed any of the scenes he paints. One of the things McReynolds attempts here is an exploration of the nature of memory. His watercolors seem like memories of a certain kind — indistinct, yet concerned with specific events. But we know that they're not, that they're based on a stockpile of pics gleaned from way too much TV. They're not about the artist's memories at all, at least not directly — but they are about our own. They call to mind whole genres of comedy and drama, bygone eras of half-assed cultural expression and repression that are no doubt part of who we are, integral to our mass mentality. Of particular interest and value here, it seems to me, is the dignity that the artist's process gives to them. In his hands these random scenes have a resonance and a quality of mystery that suggest nothing less than redemption. Perhaps that's too grand or too loaded a word, but at a minimum, these watercolors take cheesy passages from shopworn sources and make something beautiful. That's a real achievement.



"ANNA'S LOFT" Acrylic, watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 2006

There's an Internet outfit that will beam your blog into outer space for a price. I'm thinking that might be a good idea, if space-time can be counted on to warp and alter experience until it more nearly resembles something lovely. Or maybe, like McReynolds, we just need to travel far enough, and slow enough, into the space we already have.
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