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Persistent memory

Two striking exhibits at Branch Gallery

By Amy White

When Harrison Haynes returned to North Carolina after living in New York City, ubiquitous elements such as kudzu and corroded cars began to creep into his art. Haynes continues to navigate his return with work fueled by an implosion of present and past. In his current exhibition of new paintings at Branch Gallery, **Going Home is Such a Lonely**

Ride, zones of saturated color create backdrops over which pictorial fragments from Haynes' personal history hover and float.



Harrison Haynes' "Interstate Woods" (2007). Acrylic on canvas, 40 in. x 60 in.
Photo Courtesy of Branch Gallery

Haynes' new body of work posits distance, distortion and filtered memory as a kind of fiction, fable or alternative reality. In a series of seven canvases, Haynes has forged a signature palette of unreal turquoise, rich ochres, deepest-almost-black greens and stunning orange-reds. Human figures and architectural elements are rendered in tentative, washed out tones. The sharp contrast between pale figure and bold ground gives the paintings a diagrammatic feel. A legend for such a diagram might indicate the saturated zones represent perceptual shifts in the present; the ghostly figures would serve to calibrate the porousness of memory as it is filtered through time.

Although culled from his own family photographs, Haynes' narratives move from personal to

collective with radiant immediacy. "We All Went Down Together" features deftly painted figures set against a barren brown landscape. While the figures are set forth in neutral tones, their shadows consist of pools of thickly painted opaque color, azure blue. The color itself seems to transmit meaning, in the symbolic fashion of renaissance religious art. In the middle of the painting floats a ghostly gray-blue house. Everything in the composition circulates around this vaguely remembered structure. Yet none of the characters in the scene relate to each other; they inhabit the picture plane like cutouts in a collage. Haynes has summoned each of them to appear separately in this arid fictional landscape punctuated by the presence of a fallen dead tree. The composition conjures cinematic images of the Old West, as if Haynes' own recollections have merged with acquired imagery from the films of John Ford.

"Interstate Woods" reverberates with an almost classical symbolism. Three figures, a child, a young man and an older man, are placed in barren blue trees. The old man's vintage costume suggests he's from an earlier time. The young man in the middle is seen only from the back, his form ablaze in red-orange. To his right the small child also glows orange-red, as if they are both illuminated by fire or a raging sunset. The older gentleman is depicted in gray tones—his light has dimmed. Although this triadic composition lends itself to multiple readings (Father/Son/Holy Spirit, etc.) and broad interpretations (gestalt, anyone?), it still is rooted in Haynes' personal experience. The woods here are not just any woods, but the ones out by the interstate. Haynes harnesses the tension between archetypal and local.

Each of Haynes' pieces takes us somewhere, including the life-size car that is lightly painted in washed-out tones on one of the gallery walls. The driver, a young man with his back to the viewer, waves to an unseen party off in the distance, imagined in the void of the pristine wall. This ephemeral presence adds spectral impact to the architectural space of the gallery. The shift in scale subtly reinforces and activates themes set forth in the paintings.



Jeff Whetstone's "ATVs Over Evarts" (2005). Gelatin silver print, 28 in. x 35 in.
Photo Courtesy of Branch Gallery

"Wandering Off" is perhaps the most concise and mysterious piece in the show. It features a

single pale figure with his back to the viewer, hunched over as if about to fall forward. The figure is set against a field of striated color, which creates the impression he's suspended in space. Like many of the figures in Haynes' work, his placement in the picture is also a displacement. He could easily be about to walk on the moon. The figure has been lifted from earth and context. Gravitational forces have been undone. There is no clear sense of trajectory. "Off," in this case, could be anywhere.

In the best sense, there's a surreal aspect to Haynes' work, but his surrealism isn't Dali-esque. He approaches obliquely, with images that resist cliché. Haynes knows the power of editing, and his highly delimited imagery generates an almost instant and contagious déjà vu. The paintings deliver a complexity in their sense of precision, the feeling of being entirely accurate and mysterious at the same time.

Also on view at Branch Gallery are large-scale gelatin silver prints by Jeff Whetstone, in a series entitled **Pioneer Species**. These finely wrought black and white photographs explore the destructive rituals of male off-road culture. Whetstone tracks the scavengers and hordes as they ravage the wilderness with their all-terrain vehicles and shoot things dead on their days off.

But Whetstone also captures a less obvious aspect, a kind of inadvertent art making. The prints convey a subtext; they parallel the photo documentation of earth artists such as Robert Smithson and Andrew Goldsworthy. Sure, the guys in these shots never set out to whip up any art, but when Whetstone frames a row of snapped saplings or circles of wheel tracks in the dirt at the base of a mountain, the association with a Goldsworthy mound or Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" is almost inevitable, creeping in like a PBR hangover.

Branch Gallery is located at 401c Foster St., Durham. For more information, call 918-1116 or visit www.branchgallery.com.

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