

Originally Published: 6/13/2010

Art review: Karl Mullen's Irish whimsy and striking color

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Courtesy of Ron Schira

An untitled painting by outsider artist Karl Mullen

Expounding on the mythology, poetry and music of Ireland, self-taught artist Karl Mullen creates whimsical paintings and drawings of characters based on Irish folklore. Now through Saturday, his works can be seen on the fifth floor of the GoggleWorks complex at the Outsider Folk Art Gallery.

Born in Dublin in 1957, Mullen moved to the United States at the age of 20 and currently lives in Philadelphia. He is also a talented musician. Mullen's 1995 song "Whiskey From the Field" was recorded by Scottish folk legends The Battlefield Band and received a Grammy nomination for international music that same year. He additionally plays music for guitar and harmonica at his exhibits to bring his subjects to life.

In what seems his own invention, he adapts raw pigments as his material, mixing them with walnut oil and wax to create strikingly colorful works on paper and wood. Upon mixing this formula, he rubs the pasty solution onto his surfaces with bare hands and literally paints with his fingers. This rubbing technique also offers a smooth, pastellike finish and attractive surface.

The majority of the untitled artworks portray one or more characters reminiscent of legendary Irish archetypes. Naé?ve renditions of limbless leprechauns, animals and dancing sprites, presumably, float atop color-drenched backgrounds of exuberant reds and oranges. One figure of a jagged-crowned individual, who was referred to as the Bird King, and another in a fedora-style hat are seen repeatedly - and according to the artist, they are both self-referential as a contemporary everyman. These paintings were done earlier, with a much heavier, opaque paint application.

A secondary series of pieces were done on book pages, printed scriptures and musical script with thinner, transparent paint, the print or musical notes left visible. One painted on a double page of music notation is particularly nice and reaches back to his foundation in music.

Mullen's artwork can be found in many private collections throughout the United States and Europe, as well as in the permanent holdings of Robert Morris College, the Polk Museum and the Hurn Museum. His paintings were showcased in the PBS syndicated TV series "Rare Visions and Roadside Revelations" and are included frequently in design magazines such as Home Accents and Elle Decor.

The artist believes strongly in the importance of art making and creative encouragement in children's lives, as well. He taught art at the Jewish Community Center and at Montessori Schools in Pittsburgh, recently being invited to Manhattan's Ross Global Academy to collaborate with students in their art program.

Otherwise a visually stimulating exhibit, I was regrettably disappointed that the artist chose to not title any of his works, which would have made for a more complete show. Not having an explanation or even titles for the work engenders a lack of comprehension: That is, who the characters are or what they represent, their names and history. Aside from the foreknowledge that they were taken from folklore, this decision left me many others in the gallery craving relevance.

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