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Observation and imagination: Solo exhibitions reflect two different approaches to figurative art

TOM PATTERSON Special Correspondent
Oct 23, 2021



Rebecca Fagg's work will be on display as part of "Two Retrospectives" at GreenHill in Greensboro.

GreenHill, provided

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Rebecca Fagg and Jack Stratton are both figurative painters who live in Greensboro, studied art at UNC-Greensboro and have often shown their work at Greenhill, the city's premiere venue for contemporary art.

The arts center is showing their work again through Nov. 7, but this time they've been given back-to-back solo exhibitions — well-deserved in both cases. As retrospectives, these shows allow viewers to see how their work has developed over the past 50 years. (Hard to believe it's been that long, but do the math!)

There are clear similarities between their respective bodies of work, but this pairing highlights their considerable differences.

The evidence gathered here on Fagg's behalf begins with straightforward still-lives, nude figure studies and portraits, in the form of small drawings and watercolors from the 1970s. She appears to have focused intently on depicting clear glassware, whose reflective surfaces present special challenges to any artist striving to represent them convincingly. The best of these early works succeed on their own simple, traditional terms.

Fagg set a very different challenge for herself in a series of later paintings whose subjects are opaque, brightly colored, empty boxes and box tops that appear to be arrayed haphazardly, even though they surely aren't. The 11 examples included here add up to a clever response to geometric abstraction.

While she clearly possesses the skills of a photo-realist painter, Fagg eschews that genre's literalist precision, as evidenced, for example, by "Late Afternoon Desk," a still-life of books on a table. The titles and other textual information imprinted on the books' spines are blurred just enough to defy legibility, so they don't distract viewers from the overall composition, the interplay of light and shadow and other aspects of this intimately rendered scene.

Fagg's most distinctive still lifes, from her "Visitations" series, depict close-up details in her fire-damaged studio during the 1990s. Their context is fleshed out in a framed selection of snapshots and news clippings about the fire.

Among the highlights of Fagg's exhibition are her breathtaking landscapes, the earliest examples of which are small, meticulously rendered oil-on-paper images from the late 1980s. Her later landscapes are larger, more ambitious and even more striking. Check

out the exquisite color in her view of “Sunset on Frozen Lake, Maine.”

Expanding on the depictions of glassware in her early still lifes, Fagg shows off her ability to depict reflective glass in two more recent paintings. “Late Afternoon View,” from 2000, is a tour-de-force — a mesmerizing view of plants and other objects on both sides of a window seen from an interior perspective. And “Mirror,” painted in 2007, is an informal, reverse-view self-portrait set in a mirror-reflected domestic interior.

These observations scratch the surface of a substantial selection—more than 100 individual pieces — that reveals Fagg as a tirelessly inspired artist relentlessly honing her technique.

Like Fagg, Stratton is a figurative painter whose work is grounded in direct experience, but he takes a much looser, more expressionistic approach to his subjects. His paintings appear to rely more on memory, imagination and dreams than on close observation of objects and events. They’re also more involved with narrative and metaphor.

His earliest effort here is a small, abstracted landscape, “Little Bridge in Peabody Park,” from 1973. Its loose brushwork and bold use of color connect it with his more recent paintings. Predominant influences include German expressionism and the European painters associated with the so-called “Blue Rider” movement of the early 20th century.

Memories of Stratton’s childhood are the source of two “Fogger Truck” paintings, both depicting silhouetted children on foot or bicycling as they trail pickup trucks spraying clouds of insecticide — a practice long ago discontinued in most places. Viewers in Stratton’s age group — especially those raised in the South — are likely to retain similar memories, if not the ill effects of inhaling the toxic fumes.

In a related vein is “Road Rage in Giant Carpool,” a traffic-jammed highway scene in which a central, white car is impossibly crowded with silhouetted passengers. Fortunately there are no guns in sight.

Like many visual artists and non-artists alike, Stratton is evidently enthralled by fire, which he depicts in several paintings, including two whose visual power belies their small size. Flames leap from the pages of an open book in “Burning Words,” and illuminate the standing forms of onlookers in “Roy’s Bonfire (The Smaller Bonfire).”

Idiosyncratic takes on portraiture characterize several of Stratton’s strongest paintings, such as “Praying Head (Psalm 90),” whose blue-tinged subject’s head appears to float above his or her body while emitting an empty word balloon. This is also one of his several paintings rendered on unconventional surfaces, in this case upholstery fabric.

More empty word balloons emerge alongside floating, moonlike orbs from the head of a dreaming figure lying on a grid-patterned sofa in “Hypnopompic Cavalcade.” One of Stratton’s most intriguing images — and one of the most recent — it was painted in 2020, perhaps in response to the COVID-19 “lockdown” that kept many people confined to their homes for most of the year.

Lone, airborne figures who seem to defy gravity are central to “The Ascension of the Air Guitarist” and “Robert as Icarus Ascending,” whose subject grips the handlebars of the Stingray bicycle he appears to ride into the stratosphere.

More plausible scenarios characterize several of his paintings of people swimming and cavorting in bodies of water. Especially effective for its underwater perspective is “Down on the Wreck,” in which a snorkeler wearing only a face mask explores the bottom of a blue lake or shallow sea depicted in cross-section, with a small boat floating on the surface at the top of the composition.

While color plays a key role in much of Stratton’s work, his retrospective also includes several high-contrast, monochromatic ink drawings that treat similar subjects.

Want to go?

What: “Two Retrospectives” with work by artists Rebecca Fagg and Jack Stratton


Where: GreenHill, 200 N. Davie St., Greensboro

When: Through Nov. 7

Gallery hours: Noon-5 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday or by appointment

Information: 336-333-7460 or greenhillInc.org

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