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Contemporary Art Review Los Angeles Review: Rob Thom at M+B

by Lindsay Preston Zappas | May 11, 2019



Rob Thom's paintings have you mining your brain to connect dots, eager to name what you are looking at. "It's like the elongated figures and warped perspectives of Mernet Larsen, but with less geometry," you posit. "The orgiastic bacchanal of Hieronymus Bosch, but with more pizza; the chaos of *Where's Waldo* but with more carnage; the depiction of white America similar to Celeste Dupuy Spencer's, but less Trumpy." Thom's oil paintings—which have not been shown in his hometown Los Angeles for several years—are all these things and none of them, and it is this audacious amalgam of the familiar and the nameless that is so captivating. Thom scans crowds across America to present a mish-mashed

collection of scenes—track and field meet, carnival, wrestling match, crowded beach—that feel rooted in everyday leisure while also feeling, at moments, dreamily otherworldly. "Here are the crowds," proclaimed the press release.

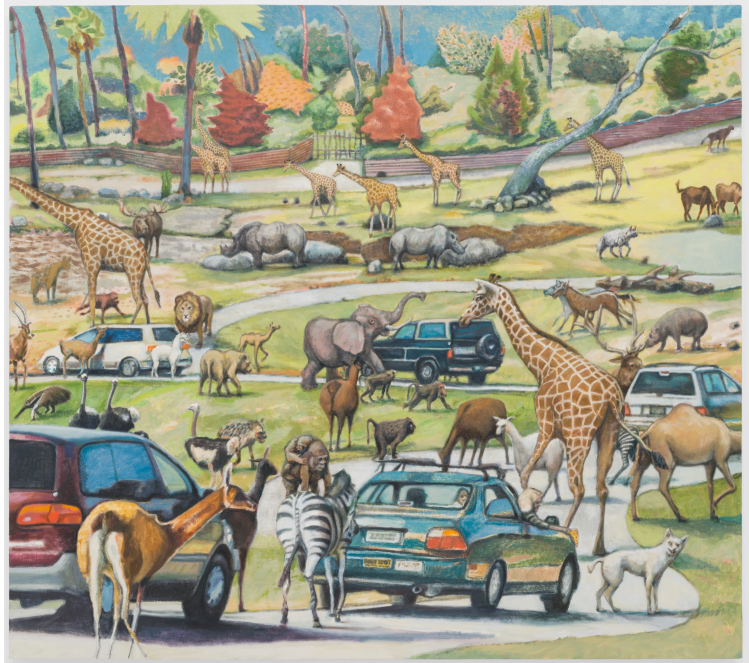
Across the work, wax was mixed with oil paint to create a surface that absorbs light with its textural matte finish. Garishly-colored underpaintings in bright orange or neon turquoise peek through his rendering of ghoulish faces or choppy waves, adding an off-kilter energy to his banal American scenes. Stylistically, the paintings feel older than they are; an approach to figuration that feels more educational—like you might find in an old *Highlights* magazine—than the Quarelses and Schutzes that currently populate contemporary galleries. The non-descript clothing that Thom's subjects wear (blank baggy tees, high-waisted jean shorts, subtle mullets) feels vaguely '90s, as if you might spot a shy and braces-laden childhood version of yourself lingering in the background. Although in a couple of paintings, figures hold smart phones, the scenes feel decidedly pre-internet.

In *Fair Walkers* (all works 2019), a family skulks along in white tennis shoes pushing a stroller past rows

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of carnival stalls and plush banana toys. In the back-ground, other fair-goers amble, and in a cacophony of abstracted shapes and colors, the people become indistinguishable from the rows of cheaply made baubles. Strangely, in the foreground, a woman walks on the canvas, though her face lags behind, dripping down her shoulder with a macabre and angular jawline. So, here, Thom sets the stage, and invites you to play along: look for clues, oddities, and strange occurrences.

These strange inclusions don't quite disrupt the believability of the crowded scenes. Instead they suggest that what we are looking at, while rooted in truth, may also be a partial fiction. The paintings traipse into fantasy as in *Drive-Thru Zoo*, whose title explains exactly what's depicted on canvas (a cavalcade of safari animals stampeding around a zagging line of gawking cars). One woman leans out of a sedan tempting a hyena with a slice of pepperoni pizza. Like any good action, the painting almost reads as an impending eventuality—soon, nature will be relegated to an experience enjoyed while sitting back on a shaded tram, slurping a Big Gulp.



In other paintings, the outlier is more apparent. *FYB (The Juice)*, pictures the frenzy of a grape stomping festival, wherein a worker dumps a bucket of crabs into the masticated wine mixture. *Reverse Beach* shows a dense vacation scene where sun-screened tourists wade through a choppy ocean, clinging to inflatable rafts. It's not until you've spent several minutes delighting in the activities of the pot-bellied tourists that you notice a man in the left corner of the composition menacingly holding a chainsaw while wading onto the shore. In Thom's America, banality can flip to nightmare in a matter of seconds.

The artist pulls his dense crowds from a variety of sources—events he attends where he now lives in the Pacific Northwest, discarded books, and online sourced images of shopping malls, fairs, and rallies. The jeering crowd in *BRWC*—the largest and most dense painting in the show, depicting a swarm of wrestlers punching and drop kicking each other while rowdy onlookers cheer with arrested attention—becomes isolated in another painting titled *MMAF*. Here, Thom gives a close-up of the crowd itself: an overall-sporting, visibly angry woman points and yells, while others cheer and clap, and still others grin excitedly, recording the unseen action on their phones. Plain colored t-shirts and blazers devoid of any campaign

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slogans, logos, or sports team insignias allow this rag tag bunch to exist as any crowd, anywhere. Still, West Coast liberals they are not, and their expressive jeers point to a more base level event—whether wrestling match, cock fight, or Trump rally. By removing any demarcating details, the crowd comes to represent the buzz of flagrant anxiety so ready to are and out these days, in response to any action.

After the various throngs of people portrayed across many of Thom's paintings, *The Cold Room* is almost completely devoid of them. Save for a few small figures hemmed into the bottom corner of the composition, the discordant crowds here are replaced with an unruly trash heap spilling across the canvas. While elsewhere we see the silly, stupid, and entertaining realities of daily life, here we are confronted with its wreckage—after the carnival closes, and the wrestling match lets out, there will be trash.

And too, after the political candidates have come and gone, our emotions properly manipulated in pious and contorted rage— there will be trash. Yet more than a stern political or environmental warning, Thom's outlook seems broadly un-sermonic, as if collapsing all of our frenzied human activity (whether responding to Trump's wall or tossing back cocktails on a Carnival cruise to the Bahamas) into an equal hum of emotional wattage. Amidst the chaos of a teetering world, someone somewhere is dumping a bucket of crabs into a vat of grapes. And, why the hell not?

