

Artist's evocative paintings made where her subjects took her

Tom Patterson/Special Correspondent | Posted: Sunday, May 10, 2015 12:00 am

Josephine Halvorson puts a postmodern spin on an old-fashioned art tradition in “Slow Burn,” her solo exhibition at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art.

On view until the end of May in SECCA’s Ted Potter Gallery, Halvorson’s show consists of 23 recent oil paintings. She made each on the site where she found the subject.

In that respect she follows the example of the French and British “plein air” (open-air) painters of 200 years ago. Like them, she brings her art supplies and materials to the places where she needs to be in order to paint what she wants to paint.

What grounds her work in contemporary art practice is her choice of subjects, her relatively systematic approach and the limitations she imposes on herself when painting. She discussed these aspects of her art in the lecture she gave at SECCA in late March when the show opened.

The original plein-air painters took the landscape, and figures in the landscape, as their main subjects. Halvorson paints individual objects that she feels drawn to, typically related to architecture and/or industry, and she emphasizes details of their surfaces viewed up close.

She chooses these objects in part for their locations — places where she can work unobtrusively for hours at a stretch. But she’s primarily interested in their histories — the ways in which these objects have been changed over time, through repeated use or extended exposure to the elements. She’s attracted to surface imperfections — dents, stains, pock-marks, stray bits of graffiti — and to objects that somehow reflect the larger histories of the places where they’re found. Variations in the sizes and shapes of her paintings depend on the objects they depict, although the scale relationships are imprecise.



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Josephine Halvorson, Exposed Wall, 2013, oil on linen.

Also distinguishing Halvorson's work from other plein-air paintings past and present is her practice of limiting her work on each painting to a single day and completing all of it on site. According Cora Fisher, the SECCA exhibition curator, in her essay for the show's catalog, Halvorson uses her studio in Brooklyn, N.Y., mainly as a place to edit her paintings. Those that don't make the cut are eventually tossed onto a fire — a day's work up in smoke for each painting burned.

Introducing the show at the gallery entrance is a painting of an old railroad freight car's painted exterior, showing part of a logo fully spelled out in the title "Southern 992321." She zeroed in on this relic after she found it abandoned near a branch-line switch in Lake City, Tenn. Highlighting surface details indicating years of heavy use and exposure to all kinds of weather, her painting connects with other recent and contemporary art depicting post-industrial sites and surfaces. It specifically alludes to Lake City's history, especially in relation to the coal and hydroelectric-power industries — a subject discussed by Peter Buckley in his catalog essay. With its pair of block letters stacked atop corresponding numerals, "Southern 992321" also recalls early paintings by Jasper Johns.

Another painting Halvorson made in the same locale is overtly emblematic of the coal industry in that part of Appalachia. "Miner Memorial" depicts a crossed pick and shovel from a plaque that memorializes victims of coal-mining accidents in the days before a new hydroelectric dam created an 85-mile lake in the area in 1936. That's when the town was renamed Lake City, obscuring its industrial history by replacing the original name of Coal Creek.

The subjects of Halvorson's other paintings include close-up views of a coal-burning fireplace, a pair of wooden shutters, a "Shed Door," an "Exposed Wall," and miscellaneous pieces of industrial hardware. Some of these paintings — perhaps especially the one depicting the surface of a piece of "Cheese" — look almost completely abstract.

One of the places that has attracted Halvorson's attention is Thomaston, Conn., formerly a manufacturing center for clocks and other timepieces. During each of several visits that she made in 2012 she painted a different part of a mural on a largely demolished building's old retaining wall. In each case the chosen detail is from the image of a clock, centering on a Roman numeral inscribed in black on a white ground. In these paintings of a painting of a clock she has carefully rendered the myriad pock-marks and nicks that scar the original mural.

It's fitting that three of Halvorson's "Clock Mural" paintings — each depicting a different Roman numeral from the original mural — occupy a central place in the exhibition, because time and its continuous passage is her real subject.