

Ke Francis turns museum into inventive storyscape

By Fred Burton

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“Beulah Land” is the perfect title for Ke Francis’ current exhibition of paintings, drawings, irregular relief-constructions, books and prints inhabiting the Art Museum of the University of Memphis.

Most of these works generate funky, lived-in Edenic visions chock-full of cosmic (and low) humor and blissful yearning. Another underpinning concerns the idea of journey, and the baggage load of emotions that accompany any sojourn. Francis’ role as a restless magical artificer with supreme command over his dreamland allows for a miraculous transformation of the museum. Because his works are distillations of a playful, old soul sensibility, there is a feeling of complete pictorial continuum throughout the interior; its space is transformed by Francis’ richly beguiling artistic vocabulary and its happy union with the imaginative installation of this large show.

That so much superlative quality exists within the sheer quantity and variety of Francis’ production bespeaks an unusual degree of freedom. It’s as if he had entered prematurely into an age-old style where, after decades of struggle, he has been given *carte blanche* and all has become effortless. This freedom from revision and the certainty of his hand portrays an absolute confidence that is rare enough in life or art.

All of this mind/hand certitude translates into astonishing and inventive mark making. Francis’ repertoire includes broad, wet sweeps of the brush, drips, dots, smudges, wrist twisting black lines, splatters, encrusted surfaces that have the look of dried biscuits a la Chardin, drips and dribbles, scratches, scribbles and thin-thick contours. Francis’ palette is just as varied, and ranges from bright to murky-and-indescribable, to raw and acidic, with subtle grays and tawny earth tones in between. His blacks can hold a high sheen or produce a flat matte skin. There is an intense, encyclopedic erudition bound up in this variety where nothing seems perfunctory.

Francis keeps a direct line open to childhood, to “folk” artists, to humor in life- but mysteries and terrors are also infused in his work. Instead of an Australian Aboriginal, envision a Mississippi Dream-Time; It’s obvious that he has access to similar broad galaxies of thought and feeling. Francis is a collector of tales, a storyteller of the highest order.

In this current Post-modernist world intoxicated with blind savants and insipid appropriators, Francis’ deeply satisfying, idiosyncratic gift is important and rare. His kith and kin are artists as diverse as William T. Wiley, Edward Burra, Adolf Wolfi, John Quidor, and Ambrogio Lorenzetti, grand taletellers all. Francis has discovered their secret: His works speak in the first person while embracing a universal level of understanding.

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