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Carson Monahan and Clarence Swinyer: Self-Taught Artists Shine

Mysterious paintings at Monya Rowe Gallery and rustic Americana at Kerry Schuss Gallery prove that the pull of autodidacts remains strong.

By Brian P. Kelly Dec. 20, 2024 4:00 pm ET

Excerpt...

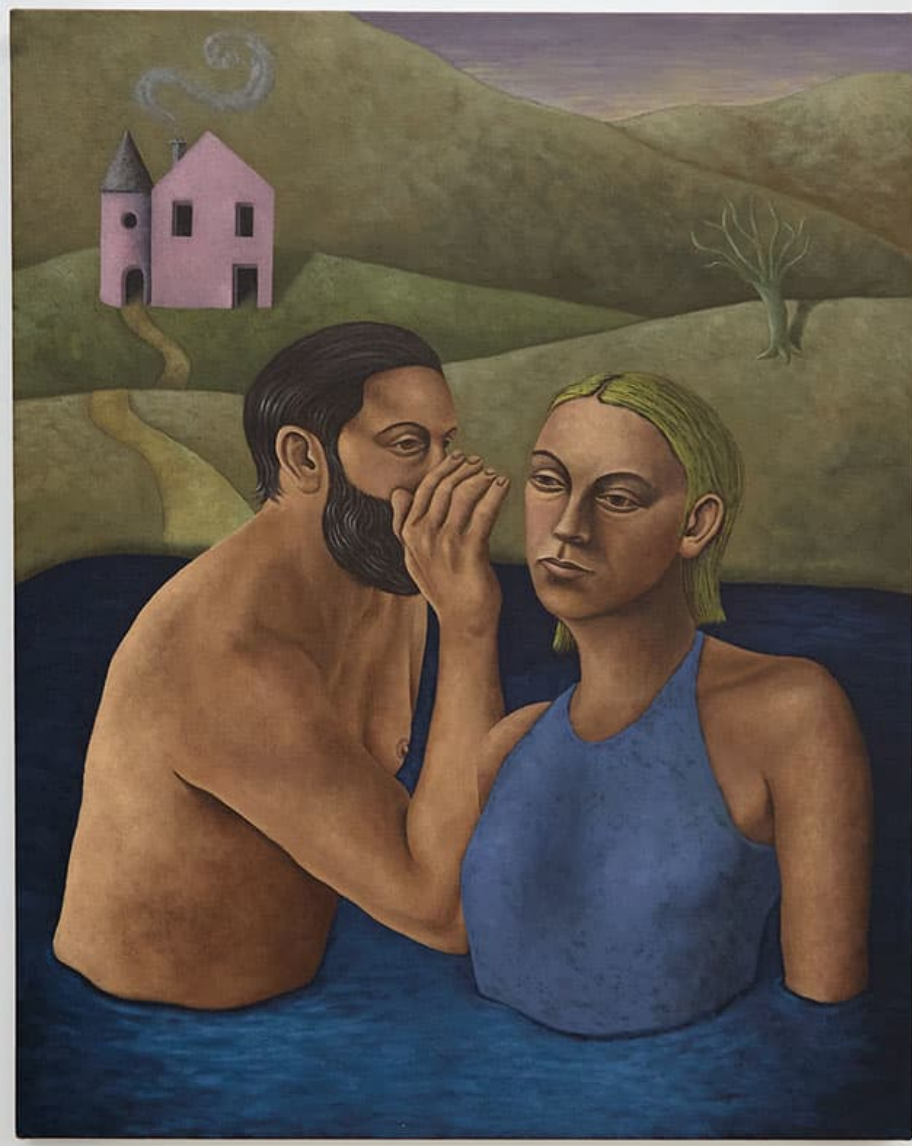
There's romance in the idea of the self-taught artist. We're drawn to upstarts, bucking convention and institutional mores to pursue a passion and forge their own path. They come in many forms, from ["outsider"](#) artists who often have few if any professional aspirations in the field to more focused individuals who give up other opportunities to try to stake their claim in the mainstream art world. Members from both those poles—and the broad spectrum between them—have achieved artistic renown (though not always during their lifetimes), names like Henri Rousseau, Grandma Moses, Henry Darger, Scott Kahn, Raymond Pettibon and Thornton Dial. Two shows in New York emphasize the breadth of autodidacts, and the reasons they remain so captivating.



Carson Monahan's 'Obstruction' (2024). PHOTO: MONYA ROWE GALLERY

After a career in the fashion industry, **Carson Monahan** began painting in earnest four years ago with the goal of making it his life's work. At Monya Rowe Gallery this dedication has been deservedly rewarded with his first New York solo show. The Detroit-based painter's canvases are portals that take us outside of time and place, their scenes mysterious vignettes loaded with symbolism and tension, conjurations that defy easy answers yet keep bringing us back with more questions.

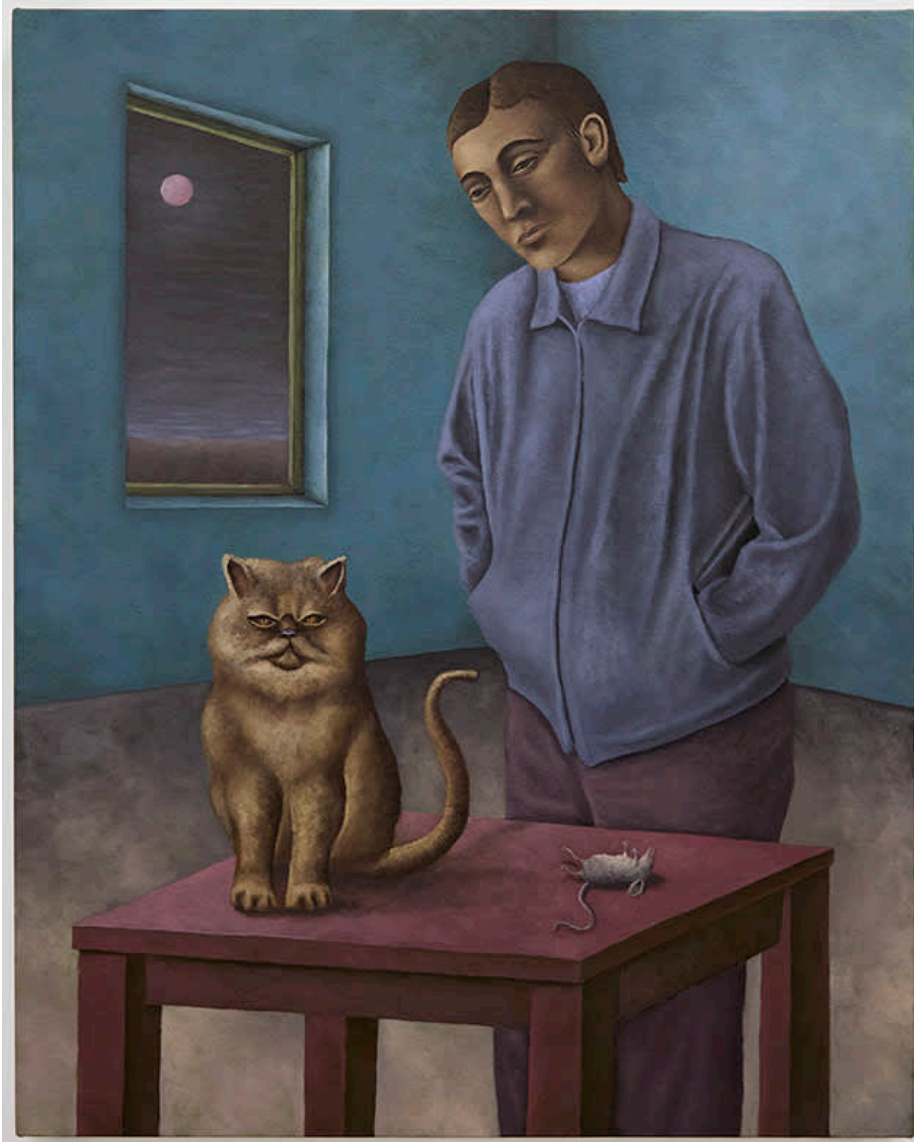
A shoeless man smokes a cigarette near a low pink wall, unbothered by both the majestic mountains behind him and the nearby scorpion that seems poised to strike. An individual harvests a pair of beets in an impeccably plowed field, staring shiftily over his shoulder as a comet races overhead. A pair of figures conspire over a fire burning in an oil drum as a canine howls in the distance.



Carson Monahan's 'Under Wraps' (2024). PHOTO: MONYA ROWE GALLERY

There's an eeriness to these images, but none are overtly menacing. Mr. Monahan's style—incredibly cohesive and honed, especially given his relatively short commitment to painting—is most directly indebted to 20th-century Italy, with architectural elements suggesting the proto-Surrealism of De Chirico and his slightly melancholic people hinting at Felice Casorati, Lia Pasqualino Noto or Elisa Maria Boglino. But in these works we find a broader embrace of other movements and styles: The New Objectivity of Max Beckmann and Otto Dix as well as WPA murals come to mind.

With simple shirts and trousers that could come from any period in the past century and locales that seem transferred directly from dreams—a bare room with an open birdcage, a foreshortened field with a domed chapel, a tilting plaza overlooked by a looming pink building—the secrets of these works redouble with each new detail we spot. Do the pair of whispering bathers live in the house behind them, or does the tendril of smoke rising from its chimney mean the owner is inside and they're trespassing on a private swimming hole? If the cat perched on a table is responsible for the dead mouse beside it, why does the man behind them both look plagued by guilt? Mr. Monahan's paintings don't readily give up the answers, but encouraging our speculation is an art in itself.



Carson Monahan's 'Midnight Stalker' (2024). PHOTO: MONYA ROWE GALLERY

Carson Monahan: Phantom Town

Monya Rowe Gallery, 224 W. 30th St. #304, through Jan. 4