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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ArtSeen

John Lees: *Krazy Paradise*

By Alfred Mac Adam



John Lees's oneiric landscapes and portraits are haunted. And not only by his acknowledged sources, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Fauves like Rouault and Dufy, the precursors of Expressionism, the niche to which Lees is usually assigned. There are other ghosts, especially the mysterious landscapes of Samuel Palmer, themselves channels for the otherworldly works of William Blake. So, Lees is a strange kind of Romantic who finds himself painting in the twenty-first century.



John Lees, *Dilly Dally Unstrung*, 2022. Oil on board, 12 x 9 inches.

Like the Romantics, he focuses on landscape rather than some unfathomable sublime, but within a species of phantasmal picturesque: he favors dark rolling hills over crags and crevices. And again like the Romantics, he is very autobiographical, incorporating in his work elements from his own life—his father, his memories of early television shows, of songs he cannot forget. These obsessive themes help explain why so many of these paintings and drawings carry several dates. He creates, he revisits, he sets aside, he modifies by sanding away at the surface and thus transforms the original once again. In no way is a Lees painting ever actually finished, and it is easy to imagine him sneaking into some museum with brush and paint to rework something hanging on the wall

Consider the title of the show: *Krazy Paradise*. The words come from a 1949 Marlene Dietrich song, “Illusions”: “For in this crazy paradise / you are in love with pain.” But her crazy is spelled with a “C,” so Lees has modified Dietrich. There may be a double source for the K: first, in Dietrich’s Germanic pronunciation of English, second in Krazy Kat, the eponymous character from George Herriman’s comic strip. Only the pain of unrequited love can link these wildly disparate works. In her song, Dietrich sells her illusions in despair; in the comic strip, Krazy Kat is in love with Ignatz Mouse, who repays that adoration by bouncing bricks off the cat’s head. There is a poignance, an ache in that combination which finds its echo throughout Lees’s work.

Dilly Dally Unstrung (2022), a small 12-by-9-inch oil on board summarizes the pathos Lees generates in his non-landscape painting. *Dilly Dally* is a character from the *Howdy Doody* show (1947–1960), a pioneering

experiment in television programming for children. There were puppets—Howdy Doody, Mister Bluster, Dilly Dally (Howdy’s silly best friend)—real people, like Buffalo Bob and a mute clown, Clarabell, who communicated with a horn, and an audience of children who sat in the Peanut Gallery. It was a mixed community that included a sexually ambiguous clown who was also disabled. In short, it was a parallel reality designed to teach tolerance in post-World War II America. Dilly Dally was a minor character, who always wore a sweater marked with a D, the main character’s pal, but always an outsider. I’m tempted to think of Lees’s decision to focus on him—“unstrung,” or freed from control—as an autobiographical statement about feeling himself to be both “there” and “not there” as an artist in his community.

This particular work connects directly to Lees’s paintings and drawings of clowns, along with others picturing a man sitting in an armchair. The clown is the quintessential metaphor for the artist as entertainer. We can’t see the real person, only the clown persona. We can’t know if the clown is laughing or weeping as he entertains us because he is encased in his costume. The man sitting in an armchair, especially *Man in Yellow Pants Sitting in an Armchair* (2022), is the distant father whose love we want and whose rage we fear. Virgil’s Aeneas carries his father Anchises on his back as he flees burning Troy, and, like Lees’s seated man, he is the past we can never fully escape.



John Lees, *Krazy Paradise*, 2001-2011; 2023. Oil on canvas, 19 x 30 inches. Courtesy the artist and No Document, 2023.

But lest we forget, John Lees is a consummate landscape painter. *Krazy Paradise* (2001–11; 2023) not only contributes the title of this magnificent show but also demonstrates Lees’s obsessive reclamation of his own work. One of the larger pieces here at 19 by 30 inches (Lees has painted on a much larger scale in the past), this landscape manages to be grand and intimate at the same time. We have clouds, a blue sky, and a gloomy mountain composed of a Soutine-like mass of color. But Lees abrades the paint to the point that he drains away any exhilaration we might find in his transmutation of nature. The first Romantics wanted us to experience the awe and terror of grand-scale nature; John Lees wants us to understand that such emotions reside within us and not in those hills and dales.

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