

Review: Nixon exhibition - a moving experience

By Don Wilkinson Contributing writer

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"Take a picture, here in the daylight. Oh, oh ... got some wild, wild life."

— The Talking Heads

Will Eisner, the comic artist best known for "The Spirit," coined the term "sequential art" in his classic 1985 book "Comics and Sequential Art." But the concept, which refers to a series of images displayed in such a manner as to illustrate a sequence of events, has been around as long as humanity has been making art. From cave paintings onward through Egyptian hieroglyphics, comic books, and movie storyboards, artists have laid out pictures one after the next to tell a story and inject the passage of time into static media.

In the 1880s, the photographer Eadweard Muybridge gained international fame for his groundbreaking images of animal locomotion, in which stop-motion photographs painstakingly document each movement of a running horse (or bison, dog, or man). Muybridge's work changed the way the world was seen, scientifically and esthetically. His significance as a photographer is wide and deep, and influences everything from Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" to the 1999 film "The Matrix," with its "bullet time" cinematography.

The painter and draftsman Andrew Nixon taps directly into that vein, celebrating the work of Muybridge and reinventing it, transforming images through the application of other media such as oil stick and Conte crayon. He invigorates the surface with bold colors, textural qualities and compositional cleverness. Nixon, a studio arts instructor at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, is currently exhibiting his work in a show titled "Stillness and Motion" at the Dedee

Shattuck Gallery.

Some of the images are not sequential in a truly Muybridgian manner, but exist in a moment of their own, much like a still taken from a movie. In "Pig," a great swine saunters, his snout close to the ground. In others, an ox trots, a bison breaks into a run, house cats leap, and a man appears about to do a backflip in "Jump." All are handsomely executed in black crayon and evoke a nostalgia for something unexplainable.

"Jumping Cat No. 9" is a large (54 inch by 84 inch) oil painting. A pouncing striped cat, orange and brown, is tiger-like in appearance. Only the pale pink tiles in the background environment betray its domesticity. I was reminded, oddly enough, of B. Kliban's single panel "Cat" cartoons.

It is the sequential works that steal the show. Staying with a feline theme, an orange cat is repeated with minor alterations in stop-motion, four down, four across. One imagine the "16 Cats" as a series of stills, that if sped up, would make up the first few seconds of a wonderful animation.

"Elk 1-3-4" is a triptych featuring the muscular antlered creature in full stride, legs far apart, legs coming together, legs somewhere in the middle.

On the great north wall of the gallery, Nixon exhibits "The Buck and Kick." It is roughly 9 feet by 13 feet, and commands the attention of the room. Sixteen panels (oil stick on paper, mounted to board) each feature a rendition of a donkey, short tailed and long eared. The ass is black against varying shades of gray and it is wildly violent, as it lifts its front legs from the ground and proceeds through long moments, as those legs hit the ground and provide the thrust for the vicious back kick.

Nixon provides a grand and entertaining experience for the viewer. And like some odd Zen puzzle, there is motion in the stillness, and stillness in the motion. Wild, wild life ... indeed.

"Andrew Nixon: Stillness and Motion" is on display at the Dedee Shattuck

Gallery, 1 Partners Lane, Westport, until June 28.

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