

Artist Ethan Murrow creates flights of fancy at Winston Wächter

Originally published April 24, 2015 at 6:15 am | Updated April 27, 2015 at 3:11 pm



Ethan Murrow's "The Influx" (2015), graphite on paper. (Winston Wächter Fine Art)

A review of the intriguing drawings in "Ethan Murrow: Jurassic," at Seattle's Winston Wächter Fine Arts.

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By Michael Upchurch

Special to The Seattle Times

Vertigo isn't something you normally think of as being triggered by a work of art.

But stand over Ethan Murrow's "Doodlebugging" — yes, you can actually stand over it — and you may feel you're plummeting, Icarus-style, from cerulean heights.

"Doodlebugging," a highlight of "Ethan Murrow: Jurassic," was drawn in Sharpie and acrylic on plywood and is set 12 inches below floor level at Winston Wächter Fine Art. Protected by a panel of glass that can hold the weight of a viewer, it's lit in such a way that you feel you're tumbling into its bright abyss, close on the tail of the airborne human figure fitted with feathered wings below you.

Murrow is the grandson of journalist Edward R. Murrow, and the meticulous way he renders his fantastical visions sometimes resembles fastidious reportage given a surreal twist. He lived in Seattle for a few years in the mid-2000s, and one inspiration behind his new show, he says, was his recollection of the Pacific Northwest's awe-inspiring landscapes.

"Whether it is Rainier standing like a beast on the horizon," he writes in his artist's statement, "or the sheer bigness of the weather, the region is a visual brontosaurus."

Murrow arrived in town last week to keep tabs on the installation of his show and to put the finishing touches to one last piece for it, "Wagon Train." He is drawn in his work, he says, to portraying "impossible labor": quixotic human efforts that he loves and admires but that have all too often gotten our species into trouble.

In "Wagon Train," for instance, a struggling laborer pulls a precariously loaded small-scale 18th-century galleon on a wagon cart across an endless expanse of beach. Murrow worked from a photo-collage he put together, but did the actual drawing freehand.

All the other pieces in the show are graphite on paper, but employ a similar technique: assembling images from far-flung sources into seamless visual worlds.

They also share a similar dynamic, as human endeavor is either dwarfed by nature (like the geodesic dome overpowered by mountain peaks in "Fiefdom") or clearly destined for disaster (like the elephant being airlifted into a rowboat in "The Influx").

"I'm trying to walk a line between admiration and suspicion," he says of the dubious achievements his drawings depict.

Murrow can give precise accounts of where each element in the drawings comes from. "General Curtis Méliès," he says, takes the studio of early experiment filmmaker Georges Méliès as its starting point, with Méliès' rolled-up scenic backdrops on the left. On the right, cables from San Francisco's Bay Bridge direct the viewer's eye toward a sublime Albert Bierstadt-derived landscape in the background. Standing before that magnificent sight is a military figure so scale-reduced he looks toylike.

While it's informative to hear the affable Murrow explain his work this way, it's also fun to puzzle things out for yourself.

"The Exit" is a case in point. It shows an airborne motorcyclist, dressed a bit like Uncle Sam, who's towing a banner behind him that at first appears to read "REASON," but on closer look spells out "TREASON." At the lower left is an urban landscape, and across a body of water from it is a dimmer skyline with a colossal pillar of smoke rising from it.

Murrow may be linking memories of 9/11 with the exile of NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden (patriot to some, traitor to others). But it's just as satisfying to leave this artist's elaborate visual worlds wrapped in their mystery.

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EXHIBITION REVIEW

'Ethan Murrow: Jurassic'

10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Saturday, through June 20, Winston Wächter Fine Art, 203 Dexter Ave. N., Seattle (206-652-5855 or winstonwachter.com).

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