

In Gerry Snyder's paintings, bulbous little hermaphroditic creatures, for the most part void of facial features, frolic in pastoral settings and against skies filled with lush clouds. These environments evoke the works of early American landscape artists, particularly Thomas Cole's Italianate paintings, and their interpretation of America as Arcadia, the Eden of the Western Hemisphere.

Snyder's gardens are populated by odd little creatures in rich, jewel-toned blues, greens, reds and yellows that bring to mind the cartoon Teletubbies and the animals that clowns fashion of balloons — happy, if sappy, images. But they are hardly benign, and in several cases in this body of work, the bouncing, balloonlike figures morph into recognizable pols: George W. Bush, Karl Rove, Donald Rumsfeld. Painting over photographs, Snyder depicts our leaders as he (and no doubt many others) see them — as poseurs, and the most dangerous kind, at that.

Snyder's work has long had sociopolitical overtones. He analyzes our cultural antagonisms through his strange race of creatures, who enact allegories intended to warn us against fundamentalism of many stripes. They are intentionally disturbing in many ways. "American Idyll," like the homophonic television program, is anything but what its title suggests.

The most spectacular example is the largest piece in the exhibit, "Kansas Taliban," equating the religious fundamentalism proliferate in Kansas with the militant Afghan religious sect. On a hill above a bucolic valley (evincing Cole's "View From Mount Holyoke"), a group of Snyder's creatures congregate; a few dip into the headwaters of the river that flows below, into a larger lake or sea; perhaps they partake of the poison that fouls all of the water. Tiny, flower-like creatures are sprouting from the earth, and larger ones profligate on three otherwise

Art Walker



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barren trees. They seem to burst free from their tethers to mass in the air above the hill, nearly obliterating the sun, like the Kansas minister Fred Phelps' apostles about to descend on a gay pride parade in Anytown, U.S.A. Yet it's all so pretty, placid and perfect; puffy white clouds populate the sky. Don't be fooled, Snyder warns.

A similar dichotomy activates each painting: the promise of America, still so real to so many, poisoned by the behavior of the few. In "The Ascension," Snyder has painted over a photographic image of George W. Bush, who rises amid a background of gorgeous — if bloody red — clouds. A tiny halo over his head is offset by the horns sprouting from his devilish red pate; he holds his arms outstretched in one of the president's common speaking gestures, which unfortunately mirrors those of Hitler during his most rabid oratories. It's a powerful commentary on power and its misapprehension and misuse.

Snyder likewise applies Biblical lore to current American politics in "The Annunciation," in which a creature with Bush's visage reaches down from the clouds toward Vice President Dick Cheney. In Christianity, the annunciation refers to the Archangel Gabriel's visit to Mary, during which he informs her she will be the mother of the Son of God. It is the most important announcement of Christianity, of course, the single moment in which the entire Christian story is foretold. But here, the profound news is not cause for celebration.

This exhibition includes oil

If you go

WHAT: "American Idyll," works by Gerry Snyder

WHEN: Through July 18

WHERE: Evo Gallery, 550 S. Guadalupe St.

CONTACT: 982-4610, www.evo-gallery.org

paintings on aluminum, which provides a sleek surface for Snyder's painting style, as well as works on paper. Particularly beautiful is "Casa Susanna," with its blue sky blending from big white cumulus clouds into a deep marine blue. Here the playful appearance of Snyder's creatures has no underbelly. Grouped on a green point of land, they gather around one large red creature; some have floated into the sky. Casa Susanna was a retreat for cross-dressing men in the 1950s and '60s in upstate New York, a place to which these men could escape and experience life as the women they wished to be. A few dark clouds float among the white cumuli, but here on their isolated point they are safe and happy.

Among the works on paper are several very small drawings in Japanese sumi ink; they are extremely delicate and light, and seem to be free of the serious messages inherent in the other paintings. Unfortunately, in this body of work Snyder did not pursue the larger figurative drawings he has done in the past — particularly the clown imagery from his exhibit at the Center for Contemporary Arts; I hope he returns to explore similar ideas again.

Snyder is chairman of the art department at the College of Santa Fe. If he can impart just a smidgen of his ability as a painter, and as one who is able to execute what he desires so clearly, his students are lucky. His handling of paint, particularly in his cloudscapes, is enviable.

Right, in "The Annunciation," depicting a creature with Bush's visage reaching down from the clouds toward Vice President Dick Cheney, Gerry Snyder presents profound news that is no cause for celebration.