

Art in America

March 2008

Matthew Blackwell at Edward Thorp

You can fairly hear the lonesome fiddles and smell the piney trees in Matthew Blackwell's recent paintings, 21 of which constituted this seasoned artist's third New York solo show, "Over Yonder in the Minor Key." The work is soaked through with a flinty, arcadian sensibility that, dodging folksy sentimentality, conveys urgent opposition to mainstream suburban culture. It offers non-conformity not as a condition of isolation but as an informed choice. Blackwell's funny, muscular, overstuffed paintings (all oil on canvas or linen, and completed in 2007) deftly balance literary, narrative, formal and painterly modes of meaning. You can tell the guy has a fine time at the easel.

It's a stone-cold eye that won't enjoy the pictorial sweep and crunch of a painting like *Progress (Worm)*, in which an enormous, ukulele-wielding earthworm with a mop of hair slithers through a barren, overcast landscape. A mean snarl of activity in the middle distance includes a blue-suited figure, splayed like a scarecrow, drawing fire from a hovering helicopter gunship while a haggard hound lolls in the door of a doghouse labeled "Rummy." Nearby is the grave marker of one "Geo II." On the right side of the painting, a double-barreled superhighway skids out in a smoky tangle at the horizon. Two tramps, elaborate dots in the distance, wait for Godot.

Two-lane blacktop reappears in *Trampoose*, in which a small crowd of onlookers—featuring a blue-headed burro and a gangly gal in a tight skirt and go-go boots—lends moral support to a reeling, drugged-out hitchhiker. "The obstacle [sic] is the path," declares a take-charge rooster in the foreground of this unmistakably New England landscape, plunking that Zen saying down in the stomping grounds of Emersonian self-reliance.

In *Over Yonder (for Woody Guthrie)*, Bush, Cheney and bickering cabinet members slide inexorably into a chasm at the paint-



Matthew Blackwell: *Over Yonder (for Woody Guthrie)*, 2007, oil on canvas, 50 by 54 1/2 inches; at Edward Thorp.

ing's center, while behind them a rickety oil derrick hung with nooses spews crude over a desert dotted with skulls. A jubilant, long-limbed donkey with Guthrie's guitar (inscribed "this machine kills facists [sic]") slung around his neck strides away from the debacle, glancing blithely at the viewer as if to take full credit.

Blackwell is an able and daring pusher-around of paint, ready to relinquish control of his surfaces just to see what happens. But he's also good at pulling pictures together. *Procession* is a rich, funny, wonderful painting. Six or seven authentic eccentrics parade along a beach, making a lusty racket with accordion, pipes, ukulele and a squeaky hand truck. In a nod to the tradition of Maine painting, a Marsden Hartleyesque island drifts in the upper right corner, bookmarking the cleft between briny azure sea and pink mineral sky. A big-shouldered bear-guy holds aloft a flag spangled with a solitary star. He's the standard-bearer of this merry band, this ad hoc politburo, this carnival of souls. As in the politically inflected modern mythologies of Max Beckmann and Sidney Nolan, Blackwell grafts a constellation of personal meaning onto a wider, social frame of reference. His work contains echoes of the myth of the frontier, when "do-it-yourself" was not an esthetic alternative but a prerequisite for survival.

—Stephen Maine

Art in America 175