

## Fran Herndon at Altman Siegel Gallery

by Aaron Harbour

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*Catch Me If You Can*: A cluster of greyhounds surging into the foreground, muzzled, wearing numbers, chasing a hastily rendered pair of rabbits through roughly sketched grass. On a muted grocery bag or faded newspaper backdrop are other creatures and, in the center, obscured by washes of pale blue, an indistinct crowd. Powerfully narrative, but hazed by the manner of its construction, this image is fugitive. The characters resist any simple one-to-one relation with the viewer whose personage spreads out piecemeal across the image. There is a spectacle here, echoed in the other collages on display.

The complex life of the image bounds into and out of view. A work of art can shake the story of its making only for so long, if at all, and this relationship goes both ways – the story or process underpinning art ideally finds itself subsumed by the experience of the work, if only for a moment. In Fran Herndon's eponymous solo show at Altman Siegel, the triangulation between the object, artist, and viewer is potentially further complicated by the artist's fantastic story. Her history meshes an outsider narrative with one of the 'near miss' and as stories go, it is very entertaining and raises interesting questions. It is more interesting to selectively apply these context clues or to temporarily suspend them and allow this exhibition of generally strong work to affect one via what is presented outside of the context.

There are paintings, painting/collages, and prints on display. The aesthetic is distinct, a delicacy obfuscated by ham-fisted intensity. There is an urgency to the compositions, and an unsettled feeling. In an untitled painting from 1962, the pair of individuals who anchor the canvas are locked in tension. They are equally at odds with a world whose fluctuating substance verges on undefining them completely. Thickly painted, the palette is rich, slightly dim, organic but with flourishes of strange pinks and oranges and reds. Large, deliberate strokes unify the whole, and seem a somehow itinerant. There is an exuberant style to it all, I thought of Franz Marc and of Chris Johanson, of a tense truce between the joy of expressive creation and its subject – the world being a place of inconsistently distributed joy. The paintings of a whole are certainly figurative, but the figure-ground boundary is unhinged as if the difference between the wet paint and the solid world is inherent and unresolvable.

A transformation has taken place between the creation of these works and our viewing of them. Art movements have come and gone (and gone as a whole perhaps). We find ourselves in a world that echoes all previous times but generally produces art only slightly removed (if at all) from things comfortable anywhere within the latter half of the twentieth century. There is a haunting here, the phrase '...the past inside the present' from a Boards of Canada song echoes this flattening. As master narratives give way to multiplicities, individual arrows of time spins like a trick played at a crossroads in a cartoon.

Illustration from Pg. 18 of Jack Spicer's *The Heads of the Town up to the Aether*: A lithograph used in a book of poetry, my least favorite of the three bodies of work on display but somehow more resonant when viewed on the website. The composition is mostly black, I can make out scrawled in needlely white marks two figures in some vague sort of relationship, perhaps one female one male. There is a sense

of a sky in a series of brush like swaths at the top, a strange primitive hand is raised by the smaller character (the man? a child?), maybe for defense, maybe to touch the face of the other. These are characters in a poetic realm, evoking via slant-rhyme glints of relation between abstracted individuals, between the artist's product and the viewers gaze (and its wish to see itself reflected).

In Fran Herndon we are presented a solo show whose agency is earned via the strength of the works within. Kevin Killian, a poet and an artist, found in Fran Herndon's work some irrefutable kernel of quality. She shares with him an interest in a convergence of the written and visual arts (indeed, his show at Sight School with Ajit Chauhan revels in their mutual fondness of the poet Elizabeth Bishop, a show that is also incidentally a must see). This fondness for text is borne out in the prints as perhaps better viewed with their intended volume of poetry, and in the collage work which has clipped text swirling about in a manner somewhere between that of Richard F. Outcault's Yellow Kid comics and Richard Hamilton's similar collages. The collages are most exciting to me,

but the show as a whole is excellent and very recommended. I am left interested in what is to come from her, whether new work or more archival materials, and how Killian, along with Lee Plested, made their selections. A shrewd gallery whose shows have a strangely consistent voice, Altman-Siegel saw in Herndon's work something relevant, and I am glad this opportunity was given.

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