

Joe Andoe: *Rolling Hills* at Almine Rech, New York

July 27, 2020



In this small show of five works, it looks like the seasoned painter Joe Andoe is paying homage to his hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma. The works describe two sets of imagery: three stags, each with a high rack of antlers; and two pictures of saddles, Andoe's equestrian version of a seat in a muscle car. Andoe is known for his limpid, emotionally affecting pictures of animals--deer, horses, buffalo. His sense of empathy with these creatures is exquisite. At the same time, despite his many years in New York, he maintains psychic ties to Tulsa; indeed, the title of show is called "Rolling Hills" --surely a reference to the town where he was brought up. In many ways, Andoe is a pure painter--his work resonates often as examples of transparent feeling. In this show, the stags reflect Andoe's ability to connect with the animals he so carefully paints, their eyes especially, as well as sum up his experience in Oklahoma in emblematic fashion in his offbeat paintings of the saddles.

We are lucky to have a painter so gifted in the portrayal of feeling. Unlike a lot of work being made today, Andoe's paintings reflect an innocence and sympathy that has to do with his identification with the subject, rather than a theoretically oriented intellectualism. Often the key to his animals lie in the artist's treatment of the creature's eyes, which are regularly meltingly liquid. The sympathetic treatment of the stags in this show demonstrate Andoe's particular ability to identify their spirit affectionately. Thus, he conveys an affection based on a mix of empathy and fidelity to form. One could argue that the pictures of the stags are a reminder of ecological damage and loss of habitat, but that perception doesn't seem to be as firmly based as the empathy Andoe is able to portray for another species. It feels more like he is looking for emotional communication rather than attempting to make a point about nature (but that of course could also be part of his perception).

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In “Stag 4/17/20” (2020), Andoe focuses on the stag figure, which has two large antlers with small nubs. The eyes, set on the side of the head, nonetheless face us head on, in a way that emphasizes their dark-colored beauty. The nose is also black, with a white muzzle behind it, and the ridge of the back is evident as it turns away, to the left, from the animal’s majestic head. The rest of the painting, its background, is a midnight black. There is so much emotion conveyed within so narrow an image range. This happens in all three pictures of the stags. The unusual but salient point about the paintings is that the animals have a nearly human presence. In “Stage 4/25/20” (2020), the animal possesses four outsize antlers; it stares back at us with complete self-reliance. Its brown head and light gray body contrast sharply with the element of black filling the rest of the painting around the creature. Then, in the final picture, “Stag 4/27/20” (2020), the antlers dominate the upper register of the painting. The animal’s ears, painted a light gray, extend outward, beneath the wide expanse of the antlers, while its head and body also display a lightly hued gray. In an emotional sense, the stags in all three pictures are both close to and distant from the viewer’s gaze, charmed as we are by this display of beauty and creaturely otherness, marvelously represented in the painting.

The saddle paintings are a bit more conceptual, featuring close up studies of them suspended in mid-air. In “Saddle” (2020), we see a brown leather saddle, complete with leather strip decorations, hovering in a landscape composed of a low meadow surrounding an irregularly shaped pond. Blue sky with clouds fills the upper atmosphere of the painting. The painting may be a nostalgic reference; it is certainly surreal in its depiction of an isolated saddle floating without support. In conversation, Andoe has commented on the saddle being an early, pre-automotive reference to a seat in a power car. We don’t see the horse beneath the saddle, though; it has been left out of the composition. The object floats mystically in the currents of air above the landscape. We shouldn’t question this work and the other saddle piece too closely. They are direct, unusually well painted indications of an imagined reality. Yet the close verisimilitude Andoe is working with here and with the other painting, “Red Saddle” (2020), shows just how believable he can render an object not closely familiar to most of us. “Red Saddle” had decorations in white, but otherwise the saddle itself and the surrounding space are both painting this salmon red color. The color is unusual, being much more imaginary than actual, but that is the key to the painting’s attractiveness.

In general, this show develops Andoe’s way of working, in which the artist pays close attention to a scene whose realism challenges our belief. The sense of detail is exquisite, making it clear that visual reality is not out of the question, even if the stags are in light but surrounded by darkness, isolate in their animal distance from the viewer; while the saddles are sharply evident as actual things, given the genuine physical reality they assert. Andoe is portraying his own vision here, in ways that do justice to the accumulation of images we are now confronted with, a consequence of time spent on the Internet. The paintings might be characterized as eccentric, but so be it--they are so marvelously detailed that their psychic reality becomes believable in light of their painterly existence. Then, in reverse fashion, their painterly specificity argues for a realism that we might not otherwise accord to such idiosyncratic imagery. This, then, is the tension--the difference between the high realism of the images and their slight strangeness in Andoe’s choice of thematic object--that makes his art so very good. Sometimes something offbeat can transform a work of art into a greater cohesiveness than we would expect from casually considered themes.