

Fear and Loathing in Fairyland

Joy Feasley and Clare Rojas paint pretty poison at Locks.

by Roberta Fallon



Joy shtick: the two-artist show beats a relentless drumbeat of doom.

life experience. Her late and beloved dog Fanny is in a number of the new works, and Feasley puts herself in the picture too—she’s the one with her fingers crossed. Elsewhere she picnics in what seems to be the last tree on earth.

Crisp brushwork, iconographic imagery and a palette of unreal colors unite the works of Philadelphian Joy Feasley and former Philadelphian Clare Rojas. The two artists, paired in a great painting show at Locks Gallery, make works that are little-girl blissed out (stars, animals, mountains and magical skiescapes), but rooted in adult nightmares of badly behaving humans and toxic futures.

This is a reunion show for the artists whose works were first brought together by Alex Baker in ICA’s “East Meets West” exhibit in 2001. Back then Feasley’s works depicted a world of nighttime canoe rides under a star-filled sky, while Rojas’ works were tiny and ornate with humorous magical realism. Both artists have moved forward while remaining faithful to old themes.

Feasley paints twilights with impossible green and pink skies, and figures who look into a void (often with their backs to us) and keep their fingers crossed. She works from

Feasley’s figures are beautifully defined and their gestures naturalistic, but her landscapes are escapes into other worlds. Sci-fi magazine illustrator Frank Paul is evoked in a vista where a volcano disgorges a bright orange plume into a sickly green sky. The depiction is at once sublimely pretty and also scary, evoking environmental peril and a longing for perfection.

The artist installed her works above a shiny black wainscoting with a 6-foot-tall felt-covered star sculpture on the floor, echoing star motifs in the paintings. There’s glitter decoration on the wainscoting panels, and the installation feels domestic, Victorian and a little “arts and crafts”—a nice quirky touch.



If Feasley wears her emotions on her sleeve, Rojas keeps her distance.

Rojas' highly coded cautionary tales are also quirky, but brittle by comparison. She uses hyperflat iconography that suggests compositions and patterns from Indian miniatures or Pennsylvania Dutch fraktur. There's a satirical edge but little humor. Her dark world is filled with portent.

Animals cower beneath trees, a little house balances atop a pyramid under a threatening rainbow, and nude wrestlers posture like angry dancers ready to pounce. Like fairytale fragments or disjointed flashes from dark dreams, the stories lack endings. While they don't cohere as a narrative, overall they beat a relentless drumbeat of doom.

Feasley's works have never looked better, and her inclusion at Locks brings one of Philadelphia's best unsung artists and her affordable paintings into the commercial realm. Rojas, whose small works have the intimacy of book illustrations and whose big works read like signs or theater backdrops, is a nationally known artist—it's great to see her works back home. Many artists are now working with this stream of fairytale fear and loathing. These two make it seem easy.

Joy Feasley & Clare Rojas: "Pow-Wows or the Long Lost Friend"

Through July 27. Locks Gallery, 600 Washington Sq. South. 215.629.1000. www.locksgallery.com

