

Search:

Go

☒ Site / Archives

☐ Web

enhanced by Google™



Mark

St. John Erickson

- ☒ Email this story
- ☐ Printer friendly format
- ☐ Search archives

Recent Columns

[Artist's exhibit at the PFAC hijacks the imagination](#)
Sep 18, 2005

[Arts center transformed into spacious gallery](#)
Sep 4, 2005

[Bay Days winner brings life to landscapes](#)
Aug 21, 2005

[Not all artists have a lot to say about the divine](#)
Aug 7, 2005

Home	News	Opinion	Sports	Business	Entertainment	Life	Classifieds	Site Index	Obituaries
Life Today	Columnists	Travel	Gardening	Dating	Health	Special Occasions			

At a Glance

Artist's exhibit at the PFAC hijacks the imagination

Published September 18 2005

Good things spring from deceptively small packages when you're looking at the paintings of Maryland artist Nicholas James Harris

Though not as large or robust as the other four shows in the Peninsula Fine Arts Center's current celebration of contemporary realism, this seemingly modest collection of quiet domestic interiors, architectural scenes and natural landscapes has a undeniable power. And it may be the exhibit that you're most likely to find yourself standing in - thinking and wondering about the images on the wall - after the usual gallery-goer's attention span of 10 minutes or so is over.

Some of this clout springs from the subtle but authoritative manner in which Harris leads your eye, channeling it in a way that not only makes you look but also persuades you to search for additional information. Not long after you start scanning one of his images, he hooks your mind's eye, too, compounding what you find on the canvas with embellishments from your imagination.

What results are spaces that seem bigger, more complicated and more mysterious than they have any right to be - especially given the physical restrictions that Harris builds into many of his paintings. And it's that capacity for creating a surprisingly large and compelling visual experience that makes his work so distinguished.

Keen observers will feel the tug of Harris' reins right away, perhaps even starting with the fact that his paintings often take on usually tall and narrow proportions. This keyhole shape forces you to peer in rather than glance back and forth - and by the very act of leaning forward a bit you begin to pay more attention to what he's painted.

Cloaking light plays a significant role, too, obscuring and disguising objects and spaces that might otherwise be readily apparent. In one case, Harris brazenly shrouds his subject in fabric - a tactic that makes it much more provocative than it would have been had he left it uncovered.

Where this artist really excels, however, is in stoking the imaginative interaction between the viewer's vantage point and the succession of spaces he depicts on his canvas. Windows, doors, gates and other passageways abound in both his interior and exterior scenes, all of them inviting us to look a little harder into the space - and wonder what's inside the next room or around the corner.

In "Alley Gates," Harris deposits us at the foot of a narrow urban lane that's draped in shadows cast by the tall brick walls of the surrounding buildings. A door blocks the sidewalk next to one of the structures, while a tombstone-shaped gate straddles the adjacent brick-paved passageway.

Above the door, however, a transomlike opening offers a glowing hint of the sun-splashed space on the other side. Light leaking through the sides and bottom of the gate has the same effect, providing a tantalizing glimpse of the hidden yet brightly illuminated realm that lies just beyond these barriers.

Still more worlds seem to wait behind each of the darkened windows that looks down on the alley from the flanking three-story buildings. Even farther back, a series of window hoods juts out from the top floor of a distant structure, signaling the presence of still more rooms crawling with imaginative potential. In the end, this painting is more concerned about our response to what it doesn't show us than what it does. And that's because the mind's eye contributes as much to Harris's work as pigment and canvas.

In "Shrouded Chair," the effect is similar yet more mysterious - possibly because of the deceptively mundane subject. Hidden beneath a shimmering white cloth, however, this unseen sitter becomes much more than a piece of furniture, taking on qualities that make it an arresting if enigmatic surrogate for something else.

Harris forces us to guess at its form, then arranges the corners and curves of the arms, back and headrest in a way that almost looks as if the chair is struggling under the fabric. He adds to this eerie energy by reprising the image in a reflection that spills down across the polished wooden floor.

To the right behind the chair, an open passage leads to a hallway and a pair of closed doors, fueling the feeling of a space that teems with secrets. Then there's the agitated shadow that gyrates across the wall to left, adding still more juice to this riddle.

Even the tiniest details may start to bristle with significance as you scan the strangely barren scene for clues. That's when you may realize it's the looking that's important here - and not the thing you're looking at.

A

C

F

E

K

E

J

E

B

L

R

H

M

R

A

C

T

R

E

S

R

M

D

R

P

C

K

—

[Newsroom](#) · [Advertising](#) · [Daily Press Jobs](#) · [Internships](#) · [Customer Service](#) · [Subscribe](#) · [Privacy Policy](#)

[Copyright ©2005 Daily Press](#)

<http://www.dailypress.com/features/columnists/dp-84087cm0sep18,1,3549426.column?coll=dp-features-col...> 9/20/2005