

PRESS

Gabriel Liston

*Take That and Stand by for Trouble*

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***"Gabriel Liston at New American Art Union."***

**by D.K. Row**

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What goes on in an artist's studio? How is art made?

You get a view inside that mysterious creative process at the New American Art Union, where Gabriel Liston has moved his private art studio into the gallery as part of the venue's second artist-in-residence program. Until May 9, Liston and the gallery provide the public a glimpse into his personal process with an exhibit that is also partly a six-week performance. But what a sweet and insightful performance it is for everyone involved, from artist to viewer.

Like the first artist in residence, Timothy Scott Dalbow, Liston has turned the gallery into a rough simulacrum of his own small studio. The core of his North Portland space -- a tiny former greenhouse -- has been shuttled into the Southeast Portland gallery, including a few work tables, chairs and, most importantly, a few dozen notebooks with at least a decade's worth of sketches, art ideas and random thoughts by Liston detailed in them.

The situation invites viewers to come in, sit down and read a few of these pages while Liston paints. For me, it was a slightly creepy moment -- essentially reading the diary of a person mere feet away. I tried to avoid what I sensed were deeply personal passages, instead casting for thoughts that revealed something about Liston's art, like this one: "I am presenting things that are unknowable to myself and the viewer, and respecting that is crucial to the picture."

For Liston, a softly intense 36-year-old originally from Colorado with a sweep of brown hair reminiscent of a bohemian character out of a Hemingway novel, the artist residency offers a few opportunities. He gets to talk to the public in a way he couldn't otherwise -- it relieves the isolation many artists experience working alone in their studios.

The residency also has given him the chance to make larger work that he couldn't in his refashioned greenhouse workspace. So far, Liston's completed one large drawing and has been working on a large painting inspired by a previous drawing of his.

Children figure prominently in the work in progress, of a beach scene or something like it. Other works by Liston are on view throughout the gallery space, including tile works whose silhouettes were printed from the covers of illustrated children's books; prints; and several beautiful paintings.

A graduate of the Pacific Northwest College of Art, Liston is exceptionally skilled: He draws well and has a fine sense of compositional focus. The Flemish Renaissance is not merely an influence for him; in some way, he's updating -- in a very subdued way -- the genre painting of that period, creating a private village inhabited by children idling and frolicking in a world that, literally, dwarfs them.

That is by intention, I suspect: Liston has three daughters -- and the world, as he paints it, is endlessly ripe for strange happenings for children, who roam the pastoral landscape seeking adventure and misadventure. They're caught in a world neither past nor present, neither actual nor vanished. Just an imagined place in an artist's studio.

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