

Frontier mythology and other novel ideas

New YAM show is an examination of cartoonish colonialism

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Who is John Henry Haseltine? You could try to answer that question in a few ways. For starters, there's his biographical information. Haseltine lives in Livingston now and has become a mainstay on the Gallatin Valley theatrical stage, but he was born in New York City and grew up all over, with stops in Jackson Hole and Kalispell.

You could look up his IMBD page. Haseltine got a degree in film production from Boston's Emerson College, maybe America's most prestigious liberal arts university, which has produced creatives like David Cross, Paul Thomas Anderson, Norman Lear and, of course, the guy who wrote "Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter." After graduation Haseltine lived in L.A. for years. His credits include behind the scenes work on HBO's "Silicon Valley," directing the music video for a Chromeo remix of Donna Summer's "Love is in Control" and a few films of his own. The most notable of those is "Spring: The Fairest of the Seasons," a bonkers 30 minute short he shot in Montana in 2016.

But if you really want to know



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Artist John Henry Haseltine is shown with "Rocky Mountain Kaiju" at the Yellowstone Art Museum.

who Haseltine is, what he likes and what makes him tick, you need to see his new art exhibition "The Mountain Clown and Other Foul Animals," which is at the Yellowstone Art Museum until February.

Although if you go into the exhibition blind, you might be confused, because there's not a lot about Haseltine in it. "The Mountain Clown" purports to be a collection of newly unearthed artwork produced by 18th children's book author Mable MacKenzie and her portrait artist husband Johan Heinrich Hanswurker, who both lived in Thistle Root, Montana, during the closing of the American frontier.

Except there's a problem, one you've probably picked up on. Those people, and that place, they aren't real. Which isn't to say that they're fake. They're just fictional.

Not fake, just fictional

"I'm more interested in the act of myth building, as opposed to the myths themselves," Haseltine said. This show is him creating a folk legend, like Paul Bunyan or Pecos Bill (or, you know, John Henry) in real time.

"When I think about Western mythology, more so than gunslingers and cowboys, I've always gravitated towards Laura Ingalls Wilder and Willa Cather," the artist explained.

He created the character of MacKenzie as a nod to the domesticity that runs through those works. There are no shootouts or high noon duels in Wilder's books but there's an awful lot of farming and cooking and actually surviving. The "Little House" books aren't more accurate than other forms of Western storytelling, Wilder herself was always open about how fast and loose she played with the actual facts of her life, but they are a different story than is usually told about the colonization of the frontier.

That focus on domesticity is one of the many ways in which "The Mountain Clown" is reimagining what an art exhibition can be. It's like a novel that exploded all over the walls of an art gallery. There's a multipage comic book explaining some of the phony backstory. There are plenty of "Hanswurker's" paintings, and even a full copy of one of "MacKenzie's" storybooks. And there are 15 statues of a Bob's Big Boy inspired Western caricature, each painted slightly different and complete with flocked hair and beard.

All of this is really high concept, and maybe it could come off as pretentious if Haseltine's work wasn't so uniformly excellent. His style is colorful and bright and boldly cartoonish,

Please see YAM, Page A10

YAM

From A7

with more details per square inch than lots of paintings have in their entirety. Everywhere you look in “The Mountain Clown” new things pop out at you. After a while with the material you start to really see it, like a gallery-sized exhibition of pages from “Magic Eye” books.

This whole project is a sort of repudiation, or at least a comment on, the myth of the American West. No other era of American history has been so widely told and retold and retold again, but if you were to show the actual inhabitants of the American frontier your average Technicolor Western, they sure wouldn't recognize themselves in it. Life out there was dirtier, grosser and way, way more boring than we like to believe.

So why not paint them like cartoons? “Beetle Bailey” has more in common with the reality of the American military than most John Wayne movies have with the experience of your average Western pioneer.

Absurdist myths

Haseltine came to this style out of necessity. He's never had any formal art training. This is as good as it can get.

Or that's the way he tells it, at least. He's being self-deprecating, and it takes a very bold artist to take the absurdist myths of the American frontier



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Artist John Henry Haseltine's “And Nobody Would Leave Him Alone” is among artwork at the Yellowstone Art Museum.

and portray them in a style that matches their absurdity. But it's true that his work lacks a certain polish you usually expect in a gallery setting. That's one of the many things that makes this show so beguiling.

“Despite not really having any training, I'm very judgmental and have high standards about the presentation,” Haseltine explained.

That approach puts him firmly in the genre of folk art, or maybe more specifically, American primitive painting, which is used to refer to the amateurish, flat paintings done by laborers and craftsmen and other

untrained artists, most of whom were too busy working to get any classical training.

In an artist talk at the museum last week, Haseltine mentioned Grant Wood as an influence. Wood was classically trained in Impressionism and had a near Da Vinciian ability to paint faces that feel like they're following you around, but you can see how his style rhymes with Haseltine's. Specifically in that both of them have this bone-deep belief that America is too expansive, too regional and frankly too damn bizarre to capture with literalism. You've got

to get weird with it.

Wood went about that in a few ways. “American Gothic,” maybe the single most famous painting anyone in this country has ever produced, achieved that by combining corn-fed, hard-as-nails Midwesterners with the incongruity of hoity toity architecture.

But “Parson Weems' Fable” might actually be his best, in which Wood made the hilarious choice to place George Washington's fully grown, iconic head on a painting of the American founder as a child, chopping down the cherry tree. It's the most gut-bustlingly funny thing you're likely to find in a classic art museum but also a sly commentary on how Americans view their own history: always stoic, never changing, all existing at the same time.

Wood made such a conscious choice there, and Haseltine has made a bunch of those himself. There's weirdness all over “The Mountain Clown.” One

wall tells a strange story, starting with a large scale painting of a lumberjack skinny dipping in a winter pond, his entire body turned bright blue. A few feet away there's another painting featuring the same man. Saved from the freezing cold, he's alive, but just barely. His nose is missing, and the parts of his body that aren't covered with bandages are now a deep red.

In between there are some action figures, still mint in their original boxes. They portray that trapper not as a strapping individualist but as blue, freezing, dying. On the side of the boxes there are advertisements for other figures in the line. One of them in York, the enslaved man William Clark brought on the Corps of Discovery. When the expedition ended and all the enlisted men got payouts, government positions and land, York was kept in bondage. The circumstances of the rest

of his life and his death are murky at best.

His drawing in the advertisement features a chain shackled around his neck. What other American tragedies have we commoditized? How else has kitsch been used to cover up colonialism?

But here's the thing: you could very easily go to “The Mountain Clown” and not get the joke. You could leave thinking you saw an admittedly quite bizarre career retrospective of an artist who does not exist.

Haseltine acknowledged that risk, laughing that he “really wants the credit for having created the fiction.”

But it's deeper than that. You can have a great time with this show, and you should. But it'll take you somewhere. Fiction can drop you off in a place that's very, very real.

“I really like the experience people have when they look at my work to slow step back and start thinking,” Haseltine said.

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