Written by Alicia Kozma
Monday, 01 March 2010 14:27

There is a hidden horror gem in New York City: The Last Rites Gallery. Mixing Gothic and Grand Guignol, part art space and part ink parlor, the gallery, owned by legendary tattoo artist Paul Booth, hosts artists who explore the darker side, whose images are drawn from the shadowy parts of the soul and force you to re-examine the fear that lurks in your subconscious. One of them is painter/sculptor/illustrator Craig LaRotonda of Revelation Studios.

Based in Buffalo, NY, Craig made the trip south to NYC this past December to share his collection “From the Ashes of Angels,” comprised of pieces which depict another world—perhaps a netherworld—where the loss of humanity is mourned by the emotionally mutilated and physically disfigured. This milieu is formed through an unsure temporality, as if existing in a liminal space that’s somehow familiar and foreign at the same time. The overwhelming effect is an uneasy feeling of where the work fits in a specific time frame.

“The stories I tell in my work are the enduring experiences of humankind,” LaRotonda tells Fango. “They are universal themes that apply to any age, so the timelessness itself is elemental in relating the message. I don’t want to place a distinct era in the images so they appear to come from a specific time. The environments most of my subjects are in are secret spaces—nebulous and unnamed.”

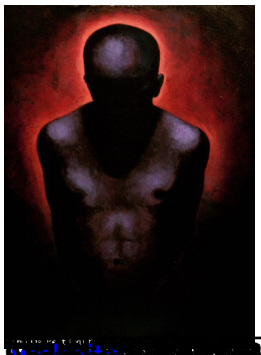
Many of the pieces feel like they could have been painted 100 years ago, specifically “The Resolution,” a portrait of a man with a Black Plague-like pallor, languishing on his side as if the weight of the world was pinning him down, all the while resigned to his ultimate fate. Other pieces, like “My Silent Heart” and “From the Ashes of Angels,” feature creatures with holes where their hearts should be—remnants of men, women, and angels. They truly exemplify the

sorrow that accompanies the loss of humanity that permeates the collection.

"From the Ashes of Angels"

According to LaRotonda, this recurring theme, coupled with a yearning to regain that humanity through a type of grotesque tenderness, is essential to his work. “There are many profound things about being human; our experience on earth is dichotomous,” he notes. “We suffer great pain and loss, as well as immeasurable joy. I have a melancholy feeling about humanity; we have found no way at all to be happy in this world without creating havoc. All this is so very heartbreaking to me. This duality of misfortune and achievement is inherent in our experience, and the idea I want most to express in my work.”

At once ethereal and monstrous, these creatures of a mangled humanity that LaRotonda creates are rendered in shadowy blacks and grays, muted blues and pale yellows—colors which give the paintings an emotional texture of sadness and a physical texture of corporeality. The sea serpent of “The Dawning” is at once the collection’s most hopeful creature, as well as its most three-dimensional. “This is my favorite piece in the show,” LaRotonda says. “As she swims out of the darkness of night, I hope the viewer can feel a sense of power in her thrust and see passion in her eyes. She is the embodiment of hopefulness and promise.” A perverse figure of Mother Earth, this guardian of the borderland rises out of a blue-black ocean, raising a pillar of flame, drawing the viewer into the dark spaces of this world while simultaneously warning them they will not be immune to the gloom they will find within. The image perfectly ties together both the aesthetic and thematic threads that bind the collection as a cohesive whole.



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