

ART GAZE

Michels' art reflects a life lived large



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Lon Michels has a penchant for patterns and vivacious decoration – whether it's on the surface of a canvas, on a chair in the shape of a high-heeled platform shoe, a fur coat, or a mounted deer head. "Life Lived Large," the current exhibition of Michels' work at Tory Folliard Gallery, gathers together all these disparate media.

Michels, an out Wisconsin native whose four-decade career has been spent in New York, Key West and now Wisconsin, uses acrylic paint to enliven surfaces with a hedonistic overflow of color. Just as his life is lived large, many of his paintings take on an enormous size, dense with meticulous detail.

"Freedom" (2004) is one such example. The canvas is about 9-by-12 feet, but the linear details come down to mere fractions of inches. Michels is well aware of art history and quotes it quite freely, even including prints of source images in the exhibit. French artist Edouard Manet is clearly a favorite, as references to his famously scandalous 1863 painting, "Dejeuner sur l'herbe," are readily picked up.

A figure based on Manet's model Victorine Meurent is recognizable, seated casually and nakedly on the ground, accompanied by fellow picnickers. Manet modeled his on male relatives, but Michels transforms the lot. We now have a sexy, big-eyed pin-up girl, a multi-limbed deity and a woman garbed in hedress wearing a large gold earring. These are some of the largest figures in the composition, but forget about finding a single focal point. There is a veritable explosion of color, figures, pattern, and detail, making it hard not to move quickly from one place to another. This opens up a variety of visual paths. There are butterflies throughout the work, and if your eye alights on one, keep going and you'll find a trail of more and more. Wending through the wilds of this composition, the viewer has quite a lot of freedom to wander, and to wonder.

One of the most intriguing pieces is Michels' "Modern Day Olympia," again based on a Manet original of 1863. For good measure, Pablo Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger" is prominently included as a small picture hanging behind the lounging woman in the foreground (this painting forms the basis for the large-scale work "Les Femmes d'Alger," which is also on view).

The contemporary Miss Olympia nattily sips champagne and stares out disinterestedly. In a switch from the original, a brawny dude brings in a bundle of flowers, rather than a black female servant.

Other changes in Michels' conception make the work even more interesting; patio doors look upon a manicured landscape, but before we mentally escape to the outdoors, there is a television to contend with in the corner of the room. The screen gleams white and a commercial for Oprah is shown. The famed host's commanding presence becomes an icon in a TV shrine. The original "Olympia" is about attention, desire, sexuality and the power of the gaze, among other things. Who really commands our gaze today – Olympia or Oprah?

This question of the gaze and complications in the way we look at things underpin these works. The colors are brilliant. Patterns dazzle the eyes, and even flesh looks like fabric when decorated with subtle sunbursts and florals. There are symbols with specific iconographical meaning, particularly in the massive "The Last Supper," where Christ floats in a modified lotus pose, surrounded by various disciples and symbols of world religions past and present. The deft precision of Michels' brush makes it intense, yet curiously disguises the hand of the artist.

Painterly, improvisational flourishes form especially interesting passages in the "Joshua Tree" paintings, which are small canvases of bare desert landscapes. Slashes

of crossed marks in the sky display Michels' love of pattern but remain loose and vulnerable around the edges.

The balance of tight control, active surfaces, buried meaning, and subtle irregularities come together in his monumental diptych, "Birth & Death." The palettes of each shimmer with candy-colored hues set off by predominantly white-and-black text respectively, spelling out the title of each panel over and over in various fonts and sizes. The common letters in each word, "T" and "H," are highlighted in pink, making a connecting thread between these two points of life, spinning a thread that holds it all together.

On view

"Lon Michels: Life Lived Large" continues through June 30 at Tory Folliard Gallery, 233 N. Milwaukee St., Milwaukee.

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Lon Michels, "Birth & Death," 2002. - Photo: Courtesy Tory Folliard Gallery



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