

# Encounters: Charles Ladson

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Ingmar Bergman compared making a film to pulling a red ribbon out of the unconscious mind. “I want audiences to feel, to sense my films,” he said. “This to me is much more important than their understanding them.” The celebrated Swedish filmmaker often recorded only the general idea of a scene, allowing the actors to improvise the dialogue and thus enhancing its unstructured quality. It is interesting that Bergman’s aim to intimate a reality beyond or perhaps just beneath that of everyday consciousness, a “feeling,” if you will, foreshadows that of Macon painter Charles Ladson, who describes his process as “pulling out” forms and ideas, one of “free-association and a lot of editing.” Starting “very abstractly” with “shapes and colors” on a blank canvas, Ladson “begins to see things emerge.” The result is a haunting space filled with realistic figures and objects whose juxtaposition defies the rational mind, inviting the viewer to enter an altered, surreal dimension, one of queries rather than answers.

Staged in a room painted an eerie yellow-green, *Cage* (2012) is particularly cryptic. An androgynous figure seated in the left foreground stares agape at an unseen menace above. The features are coarse, the hand a darkened blob, and the knee transparent, revealing weathered floorboards underneath. A trio of ceiling fans seem to press down from above. In one of two glass display cases in the distance, sits a hybrid, possibly taxidermy creature—a dog? A hog? Finally, drips of paint flung over the arm of the startled figure lend further incongruity to the carefully constructed interior. Revealing an earlier fascination with British painters of the last century, Ladson here nods to Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud.

In *Birthday* (2011) a stocky figure dressed bizarrely in a belted shirt and stockings --again of dubious gender-- stands beside a dingy kitchen stove. Whereas the masculine face is stonily impassive, a woman's hairy triangle at the pudendum offers a visual analogue to the oven's darkened glass window. Is the partial nudity a wry allusion to a "birthday suit"? The figure's sex is further complicated by a female's long hair draped over a shoulder and by the dark leggings. Echoing the title, the left hand, clenched like a fist, proffers a pale blue gift bag, and the right holds a pink cake without candles.

No less unnerving is *Outhouse* (2011). Reflecting Ladson's experience in construction, his "outhouse" is a strange stone and brick building with a low gable roof somewhat reminiscent of tombs in Europe and in New Orleans, which resemble miniature Greek temples. Underscoring this association, a corpse lies in a narrow coffin in the foreground, only the jaundiced face visible. Placed at the outhouse/tomb's corner, a battered trash can suggests a life "thrown away." In this case, the artist does answer the viewer's curiosity. The painting, Ladson says, is a metaphorical burial of his paternal grandfather, a family curmudgeon, "under the outhouse."

A kind of scrambled history, *Cubby* (2018) revolves around the notion of a "cubby hole," as seen in the tripartite cabinet in the foreground. A large bottle, a half-eaten sandwich, and the curved top of a walking stick on the counter bespeak a human presence—the present? A plastic chair from the 80s in the corner—recent history perhaps-- has been transformed into a box. But the dwarf, inspired by Peter Dinklage, in the distance to the left serves to collapse past and present. Although shown here in contemporary dress, Dinklage is a lead character in the medieval fantasy series *Game of Thrones*. Does our notion of history "cubby hole" the continuum of time?

Intuitive rather than logical, suggestive, never formulaic, Ladson's approach thus offers a striking parallel to that of Bergman, whose films provoked feelings instead of ideas.

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