

Review: Timothy McDowell's compelling show gives perspective to Covid tribulations

DONNA MINTZ (<https://www.artsatl.org/author/donna-mintz/>). ✕ NOVEMBER 22, 2021

One of the rewards of living through times such as these — 18 months of a global pandemic — is the art that comes from them. It can help us make sense of the trials, or at least offer some perspective. Timothy McDowell's *Panel Paintings: Geometries and Allegories*, on view at [Marcia Wood Gallery](https://www.marciawoodgallery.com/) (<https://www.marciawoodgallery.com/>) through November 27, does just that. With 10 paintings on panel, McDowell delivers a secular stations of the cross and a modern-day journey of contemplation through and of our time.

Like many of us, McDowell, or at least the direction of his work, has been changed by the pandemic. A professor of drawing and printmaking at Connecticut College, McDowell has enjoyed a 20-year relationship with the gallery (this is his ninth exhibition here) and he is known for his sumptuous, elegiac epitaphs to nature in encaustic. Some of these, on linen and on paper, along with a quartet of cyanotypes, are on view in Wood's interior gallery.

McDowell has long enjoyed the process of creating evocative images embedded in layers of wax over wood panels. While these are inarguably seductive in their tactile beauty, he describes them as subtle, sublime and passive.

He felt, however, that the social, environmental and existential questions of this pandemic moment demanded a louder voice and a different kind of response.

In his Covid seclusion, he wanted to make paintings that



resonated with these pressing concerns. He wanted to make paintings he had never seen before.

The central figure in “Hero Recognition” wears the now-familiar face shield and blue gloves of a Covid healthcare worker.

McDowell uses art historical references to illustrate modern dilemmas. With painting, collage, printmaking and woodworking, his narratives become roadmaps to the interior workings of a curious, knowledgeable and highly thoughtful artist; he invites the viewer along for the journey. In his talk at last month’s opening, he described his art making as a three-way conversation between artist, material and process where none rules and each lends to and informs the other.

A fourth element, the participation of viewer as problem-solver, elevates the experience. On this level, the work operates as intellectual and visual puzzles, most likely created by the artist for himself as much as his imagined audience. Merriam-Webster describes a puzzle as a “question or problem that requires thought, skill, or cleverness to be answered or solved.” Indeed. The challenge of discovering the cumulative meaning in the puzzle parts of each painting brings them to life.

“Hero Recognition,” 2020, seems to hold court, or offer protection, over the room. This work employs an actual puzzle, the Toeplitz Conjecture, or inscribed square problem, so named for the German mathematician Otto Toeplitz. In 1911 Toeplitz predicted that “any closed curve contains four points that can be connected to form a square.”

McDowell situates his modern-day hero within one of these curves. He sports perfectly painted jeans and a full-torso tattoo (actually marbled papers from Italy where McDowell spends part of every year) and wears the now-familiar face shield and blue nitrile gloves of a healthcare worker in the time of Covid. One shoulder is winged and the other supports a broken, splinted arm. Allusions to Paul Klee’s 1905 etching “Der Held mit dem Flügel” (<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/63858>) (“The Hero with the Wing”) are unavoidable. Born with one wing, Klee’s existential hero tries relentlessly to fly, which results in breaking his other limbs.

McDowell includes Albrecht Durer’s 1513 “Knight, Death, and the Devil,” (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/336223>) an engraving dedicated to three virtues, theological, intellectual and moral, as represented by those three eponymous presences. McDowell suggests that our 21st century pandemic has delivered a new hero worthy of inclusion in Durer’s virtuous pantheon.

Each component is beautifully rendered — heavenly clouds, a laurel wreath, the *trompe l’oeil* effect of a torn poster which conjures another Italian reference in the artist Mimmo Rotella — making the sum of its parts even more so. Yet there lingers the sensation that so much is being missed. This is a good thing. You will want to linger too, with all of it.

McDowell suggests his narrative by juxtaposing images, the sacred against the profane, the timeless with the banal. “All This Could Be Yours,” 2020, features a central medallion filled with five gleeful young men, tomato red bodies in Speedos and “medieval” head coverings. They are seemingly carrying aloft a fully clothed older man who looks down in fear and wonder at the green pastures and winding river far below.

Astute historians among us (this viewer was not one until prompted) will recognize the amazing similarities between the recent news photograph (<https://www.alamy.com/hungarys-substitute-goalkeeper-attila-decker-r-throws-head-coach-tibor-benedek-c-into-the-pool-after-their-team-won-the-mens-water-polo-gold-medal-match-against-montenegro-during-the-world-swimming-championships-at-the-piscines-bernat-picornell-in-barcelona-august-3-2013-reutersmichael-dalder-spain->



[tags-sport-water-polo-image378591928.html](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/336142)) of a winning, swim cap-wearing water polo team throwing their coach in the pool and the circa 1470-75 engraving by Martin Schongauer, "[Saint Anthony Tormented by Demons](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/336142)"

McDowell juxtaposes the sacred and the profane in paintings such as "All This Could Be Yours."

(<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/336142>)."

McDowell takes his colors and aerial perspective from a colored drawing of the same made by a teenage Michelangelo a decade or so later. Jewelry and money spill from *trompe l'oeil* drawers as the image of the Tower of Babel lends its critique and its warning at the folly of such pursuits.

"Sea Floor Vanity," 2020, features a lone diver, seen through an improbable window, gathering plastic on the bottom of the ocean. His dead fish and empty plastic bottles, Morandi-like on the table before him, offer a *vanitas* for our times.

Fortunately, the artist's tendency toward beauty is irrepressible. "Bygone," 2020, features a distant landscape worthy of a medieval illuminated manuscript. "Mantle — For Barkley," 2020, after his friend the painter Barkley Hendricks, features clouds, a perfect pink rose and a haloed man.

McDowell
seduces with
his skill — in
paint
handling,
drawing,
printmaking,



In spite of his reflections on pressing Covid concerns, McDowell still shows his love of beauty in the distant landscape of “Bygone.”

woodworking, storytelling — to admonish in a way that never feels didactic. This is a conversation, not a lecture. Or, perhaps, it’s a lecture that is so beautifully wrought the viewer doesn’t feel pressured. But take notes at this one; some would say the viewer ignores the messages therein at her own peril and that it’s worth pondering the connections experienced here.

At one end of the gallery is a series of 10 small (24 x 19 each) portraits, all oils on wood panel. They rest on a shelf, right next to one another like movie stills or frames in a comic.

After McDowell completed the panel paintings in the months before the show, he turned to these fanciful and mostly imagined portraits as a way of exploring a wider range of process with paint. Hence the collective title “Human Interest: An Exploration of Process and Portraits,” all 2021. Without repetition of form, image or theme (beyond portraiture), they form a compelling, cohesive body and deliver what he refers to as a culminating narrative, though one hopes that this is not — a culmination, that is.

As his historical references attest, good art survives its own moment. McDowell met his goal of making intelligent paintings for *our* moment, a moment that neither he nor anyone else has experienced before. He created in them a timeless quality that all the most present work possesses. I suspect they will stand the test of time. If only we can.

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Donna Mintz (<https://www.donnajmintz.com/about>) is a visual artist who writes about art and literature. A current studio artist at Atlanta Contemporary, her work is in the permanent collections of the High Museum of Art and MOCA GA. Her essays and reviews have appeared in the Sewanee Review, Sculpture magazine, BurnAway, and ArtsATL, where she is a regular contributor. She recently completed a book on the life of writer James Agee and holds an MFA from Sewanee's School of Letters at the University of the South.

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