

Bill Frederick
Something About You
Elmhurst Art Museum, Elmhurst, Illinois
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Review by artist and critic Diane Thodos, published on Neotericart.com March 2010

A dumpster and an abandoned gas station. A nuclear cooling tower next to a junkyard. Craning electric street lights on an empty highway. These are the places which the expert draftsman Bill Frederick has always chosen as his subjects. His scrupulous ink renderings from photographs strain to record abandoned and banal modern structures, often giving them a quaking and ominous quality. His distinct palette of black and white gives his subjects a dramatic sense of being ghostly. Mundane structures of everyday life are embedded with an intense focus and belie a strange subjective hum below the surface of ordinary "empirical" existence.

In one drawing a boy stands on a beach with the slash of an airplane vapor trail above his head. There is a distinct tension in the scene: a contradiction between man and machine. The line in the sky seems to be a harbinger of the figure's isolation and loneliness, a distant sign that speaks of the alienation that exists behind everyday appearances. The mundane becomes disproportionate and strange. People in several of his pictures seem trapped in a desert of everyday reality, trying to make sense of their existence and coexistence within it. They are strangely objectified, as though puzzled to find themselves where they are. In several drawings, a woman sits in her car where deep shadows cast a gloomy and imprisoning mood. Nature itself is made unnatural, even in the middle of the woods where man-made elements such as a picnic table or canoe assert themselves with an oblique strangeness to the surrounding nature, making nature itself strange.

The artist also concentrates on the painstaking rendering of the traces of phenomena from photographs that are out of focus or jittered. Some works reproduce the chemical tones of color photography or show unfocused elements to create visual depth. This has the effect of making the concretely real strangely unreal and hyper-real at the same time. These photographic phenomena sometimes give a distancing quality to his subjects and imbue them with an existential silence that is tinged with melancholy that longs for connection and transcendence. The mundane has become otherworldly.

Some pieces in the show have a distinctly Hopperesque quality to them. They demonstrate a theme that both Frederick and the American realist painter Edward Hopper are drawn to: the incommensurateness of our modern environment to human existence. Structures and machines signal a profound break with human proportion and meaning. There is no mistaking Frederick's pictures for images that are aimed at "tricking the eye" or are obsessed with the exact rendering of surfaces for their own sake. His pictures create an existential tension between the objectively, even incomprehensively, real and suppressed emotions vibrating below the surface. The subterfuge of feeling in his strangely barren subjects mark the everyday appearance of things with ominous significance. His people are real in their feelings, if somehow lost and bewildered (like Hopper's people are) by their existence in the modern world. The deadening effects of modernity are both a mystery and a dark dream, where emotional substance still attempts to break through an alienating contemporary landscape.

Frederick's works should not be mistaken for simplistic photorealistic transcription: they do not seek to celebrate popular culture in city life as the kind of superficial subjects which many Photorealist artists have depicted in the past. Nor do they sentimentalize abandoned structures and landscapes. There is a searching eye and mindfulness behind the meticulous surfaces: technical virtuosity is at the service of a subjective task that his mind seeks. There is a strange wildness in the world he glimpses behind modern banality; not sterility, but the emotional struggle with the sterility of modern, abandoned environments. Bill Frederick remains a contemporary emotional witness in his art, and a keeper of internal human experiences in a true Chicago art vein.