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Don Hershman, Barn # 2, Acrylic, pencil, and ink on wood panel. Image: Nick Gutierrez

Metaphor for Mortality

BY MARK TAYLOR

Artist Don Hershman On Imagining Himself As A Barn

Barn #1. 2024. Medium: Acrylic, pencil and ink on wood panel. 60 x 72 in. Code Switching #5. 2023. Medium: Acrylic, ink, and pencil on wood panel. 36" x 36" x 2.25." Photos by Nick Gutierrez



Barns are deceptively simple forms, which might explain their enduring appeal, especially among folk artists. The color is usually primary: a red barn in a field of green grass against a blue sky populated by a yellow sun. As axes of farm activity, barns represent the convergence of man and nature, conjuring images of callused hands and organic produce, waves of grain blowing in an afternoon breeze, and fields of cows lazily chomping on sweet grass.

Barn paintings do not, however, ask us to ponder the nature of farming practices, so many of which utilize genetically modified seeds and petroleum based fertilizers. Nor do these idealized images require us to consider the economic and environmental challenges farmers currently face in a warming world. Instead, they summon idyllic notions of communal effort (barn raising, square dancing), and recall storybook illustrations of talking animals forming unlikely alliances to save family farms.

These images tend to romanticize the pastoral, simultaneously invoking and concocting a less complicated agrarian past.

In his first San Francisco solo exhibition at SOMA's Radian Gallery that runs through July 7, podiatric surgeon-turned-painter Don Hershman imagines himself as a barn. Presenting a collection of 22 paintings of buildings on wood panels of various sizes, Hershman presents the barn as a metaphor for endurance against the inevitable wear and tear of aging. "What you accumulate in your life, all of the experiences, the joys and the tragedies that move you forward, make you deeper, make you richer, make you interesting, make you more compassionate... All those things I see in barns."

Hershman produced his first barn painting in 2020 during the height of COVID-19. Driving through rural northern California, he began to notice and then photograph barns, which he describes as "stoic structures, weather worn, still standing." For some reason, they made him think about all the trials and tribulations of life. "The barns are portraits. They are all edifices with voices."



Barns are particularly fertile ground for anthropomorphism and pareidolia (the tendency to perceive a specific, often meaningful image in a random or ambiguous visual pattern). Perhaps their connection to sustenance inspires us to assign them human faces, moods, and personalities. The sight of peeling paint reminds us of aging skin; we imagine the loss of mobility or crippling impairment at the sight of damaged structures succumbing to the forces of nature. Neglected buildings are eventually (and often swiftly) dissolved and reclaimed by the land that once supported them.

Hershman senses the barns speaking to him and his generation. "I am turning 70 this year. I have been around for a long time, as have these barns. There is a parallel."

Growing up in New York, Hershman developed his love of art during visits to the city's museums, and was inspired to take up drawing. Though he fantasized about becoming an artist, Hershman instead pursued a career in medicine, eventually establishing a surgical practice in San Francisco. However, he continued drawing through medical school and surgical residen-

cy, producing index card sketches of complex anatomical forms for memorization. He returns to these small drawings every 10 years when he must renew his surgical credentials. Hershman describes his first paintings as "somewhat naive" watercolor still lifes, a few of which were included in a 1992 group show at Radian. The sale of these works provided the validation he required to pursue an artistic practice more vigorously. Since then, Hershman has worked across a large range of subjects; his painting style often dictated by intent, while his execution reflects the evolution of decades of practice and growing proficiency. "I tackle each body of work detached from what I did last. Many artists repeat different versions of the same thing. I am not that artist. I move from portraiture to still life to architectural painting. I don't really limit myself in any way. Though, I usually prefer to have a message behind my work. I want to take the audience on my journey."

Grounding the experience within a narrative frame is an important part of the process for Hershman. "I Am a Barn" is the frame that brings meaning to the painter's latest collection of detailed architectural renderings of barns surrounded by rough, improvisational landscapes. The evidence of a life journey is expressed across multiple panels. Layers of paint represent the accretion of time etched into the facades of aging buildings. "I Am a Barn" asks viewers to contemplate their own fortitude through images of buildings that have faced down the elements and endured.

"I Am a Barn" is on view through July 7, 2024 at Radian Gallery, 440 Brannan Street, San Francisco. Hershman's work is also featured in "Pride Not Prejudice," a group show at the Sausalito Center for the Arts from June 14 through July 7, curated by Joseph Abbati and Charles Stinson in conjunction with the Sausalito Pride Celebration. Hershman completes his triple play joining artists Joseph Abbati and Yunus Chkirate for "Kindred," another pride month exhibition, at 2358MRKT Gallery in SF's Castro District June 1-30.