

Collection Insights: David Slater, *Subterranean Blues*



Every Body Needs Milk, 2008, oil on canvas

All human beings are also dream beings. Dreaming ties all mankind together.

Jack Kerouac

Politics Aside

Throughout a career that spans nearly half a century, David Slater's narrative painting style has morphed in and out of wavy dreamscapes and political angst, frank sexuality and the kind of cultural warfare that came to define a generation. Uncompromising and eccentric, inside this artist beats the heart of a revolutionary. If Max Beckmann, Diego Rivera and R. Crumb procreated, David Slater would undoubtedly be their love child. Islip Art Museum is pleased to have an opportunity to examine the life and work of this intriguing Sag Harbor artist, **Collection Insights: David Slater, *Subterranean Blues***.

Combining allegory with real life, Slater's rousing body of graphic narratives span everything from his insurgent participation at Wounded Knee to cross-country train hopping to epithets from the Kabala, the literary arts and popular culture. He transcribes these stories into the visual diaries he's maintained for decades, and it is from these works on paper, now numbering in the tens of thousands, that he creates his paintings. Slater somehow manages to merge the secular and the spiritual, the rational and the hallucinatory, the blasphemous and the righteous with a kaleidoscope of skulls, schooners, sunrises and scorpions. His bookshelves and closets are lined with the spiral notebooks that house decades of crafted images, photographs and collage elements.



In *Ghost Ship*, a massive schooner called “Scorpion Moon” drifts toward the shoreline, its tattered sails flowing in the breeze amid a swirling mélange of cultural and historical references to Sag Harbor and Malta, pirates and Jolly Rogers, horizons and skies. The narrative, fueled by a kind of ad hoc patriotism and a palette that is chiefly red, white and blue, achieves graphic precision while Slater’s interior monologue, overt symbolism and private references provide endless associations, both cognitive and visual. Sausage-shaped clouds drift in the sky as the sea recedes toward Shelter Island -- or another island. The

affect is heightened by the artist’s ironic use of pictorial space and the words and emblems he utilizes that bounce between foreground and background in the composition.

In contrast to the formal architecture of his canvas paintings, Slater’s handling water media produces a shoot-from-the-hip imagery that slurps across the page like melted ice cream. The same subjects inhabit his works on paper as they do his canvases – snakes, stars, Indians and myriad bathing beauties, coquettes and nudes – but the medium induces Slater's brushwork to exude a loose primitivism that is as refreshing as it is masterful.

David Slater spent part of his life drifting across America ala Cassady and Kerouac, and it’s fair to say that he still retains a good dose of wanderlust. If he’s not traveling to somewhere, he’s definitely traveling *within* something – a book, a memory, a painting or a good story. In January, 2011, NPR's John Biewen will feature Slater in conversation about John Steinbeck, a former Sag Harbor resident whose home is within walking distance of Slater’s, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Travels with Charley*. Trust me -- you don’t want to miss that.

Janet Goleas, curator

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