

Artist Tom Stanley takes us on a ‘Road to Nowhere’

By Scott D. Elingburg

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“Hoboken Triptych B3”

I've always been fascinated with contradictory and oxymoronic turns of phrase. William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, two of my favorite authors, built much of their writing careers on making sure we could never quite grip the conundrum of the human condition. The best authors and the best artists are always pushing their work into the realm of the unknowable and the contradictory.

Which is what makes Tom Stanley's new exhibit, “Road to Nowhere,” such an intriguing collection. The title alone is enough to rope me in. The format of Stanley's paintings, triptychs (a picture or relief carving on three panels, typically hinged together) that are acrylic on canvas, is one that creates a sense of motion, connectivity and familiarity when utilized correctly.

“Road to Nowhere” is a collection of abstract expressionist paintings that identifies and incorporates elements of travel and cityscapes through use of linear shapes, geometric objects and common complementary colors that rest easily on the eye of the viewer. Four triptych collections, each bearing the same title of the exhibit and denoted by the first four letters of the alphabet, comprise the central pieces of the exhibit, though another triptych collection from Stanley's series “Hoboken Blocks” and a few loose, non-triptych paintings round out the exhibit.

Modernist Alexander Calder inspired the “Hoboken Blocks” series. (And Hoboken, by the way, is one of my favorite words in the English language because it simply trips off the tongue and the consonants act in harmony.)

The “Road to Nowhere” triptych is by far the busiest of all the works. Each piece is grounded in black and white and features sites common to any traveler: water towers, bridges, signs and arrows, to name a few.

Scanning the triptychs one after another feels like a madcap race through landscapes inhabited by Jack Kerouac and Robert Frost. Lines lead to nonspecific places, night and day are represented through light and dark, and details emerge only after you stop to examine smaller pieces of the works.

The “Hoboken” triptychs are distinctive for their “connecting” middle pieces; a white on black geometric object laid directly in the middle of the canvas. The surrounding pieces, the “outer” pieces, contain colored abstract shapes against a bare white background.

Stanley, chair of the art department at Winthrop University, used industrial designs and the technique of sgraffito, the act of drawing into wet paint and an Italian term that translates to “scratched away,” as references for his work in “Road to Nowhere.” And, in case music aficionados are wondering, Stanley did take inspiration from the Talking Heads song, “Road to Nowhere,” for this exhibit with the same name.

“Road to Nowhere” is one of those oxymoronic tunes and, like the Southern authors I mentioned earlier, the phrase, the song, and some of Stanley’s work, all take a joyful run at doom and resignation but make it feel familiar and even lovely.

What: Road to Nowhere by Tom Stanley

Where: The George Gallery, 50 Bogard St., Charleston

When: Feb. 20-March 5; the artist will speak at the gallery at 3:30 p.m. Feb. 20