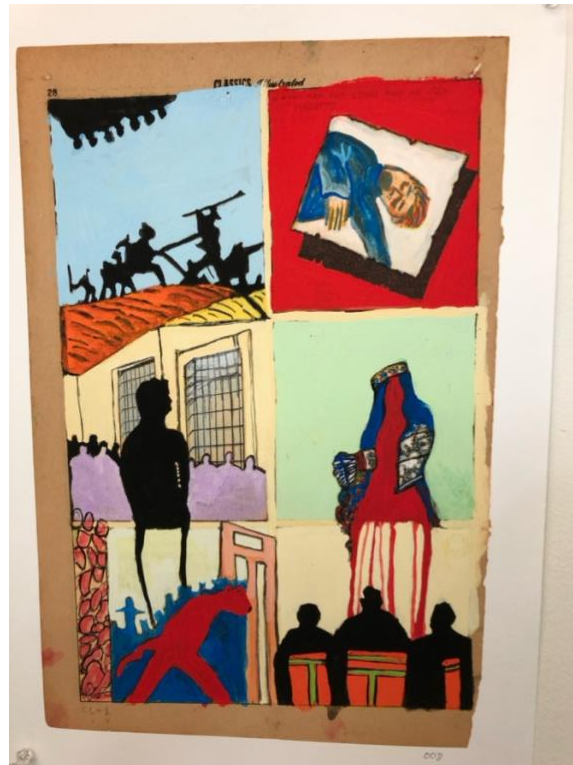


Classics Illustrated: Paintings by Francie Shaw

A show of new pictures by Francie Shaw opened at the Right Window Gallery in San Francisco on April 6, sponsored by Small Press Traffic. Entitled *Classics Illustrated*, the series of gouache paintings and enlarged prints presents the viewer with a set of dramatic narrative snapshots in jarring fragments that provoke feelings of amusement, strangeness, and the uncanny. According to Shaw, her method was to collect old comic book versions of novels such as *The Count of Monte Christo* or *The Swiss Family Robinson*, then paint over them, sometimes preserving the typical six-panel grid, other times effacing it, either partially or totally. The resulting scenarios are mysteriously evocative yet defiantly enigmatic.



In each frame, human and animal figures are cloaked in swaths of brightly colored material and stand out against highly contrasting-colored backgrounds. One puzzling and sometimes disturbing effect is that, with some exceptions, the faces of the characters are hidden, either wrapped in cloth or blacked out in silhouette. The erasure of faces puts the identity of the characters up for grabs.

For example, in one six-panel grid, we see a group of warlike figures in silhouette on a rooftop; a discarded photo of a male subject, possibly a murder victim; a man facing a crowd and, in the background, two large windows; a human figure with the head and tail of a cat or dog; and a queen standing before three seated figures, their backs to the viewer. These descriptions are not obvious, for a great amount of interpretation is necessary simply to make sense of the images.



A propos the blurring of distinctions between description and interpretation, Shaw explained that as a child she often saw faces in natural phenomena such as clouds. The scientific name for this type of perception is *pareidolia*. Pareidolia can cause people to interpret random images, or patterns of light and shadow, as faces. Such perceptions occur naturally since the brain tends to assign meaning wherever it can. The pictures in *Classics Illustrated* take advantage of this tendency by emphasizing ambiguity and stimulating the viewers proclivity to make meaning.

“I like busting up stories and colliding narratives to see what happens,” said Shaw. “I want to show how everything can be something else.” By breaking and mixing standard stereotypes, she reduces the typically heroic status of the comic book pantheon to a more common ground. “We’re more complicated than one social role,” she said.

The feelings of estrangement evoked by the images reminded me of surrealist painting and poetry. When asked I asked Shaw how she felt about surrealism, she demurred. “The work looks sort of surrealist but that’s not how I think of it or how I work,” she said. “I think the best-known surrealist paintings – Dali, Magritte, Carrington, Ernst (ick, so sexist) – are not very improvisational, at least for me. I dislike most of the surrealist classics because they seem so programmed, though there are many I love, like Kahlo and early Miro. But I think my intention is close to theirs, the unfamiliar and sort of haunted. Uncovering associations that are different for everyone.”

Everyone who wants to can see *Classics Illustrated* for themselves at Right Window Gallery, 922 Valencia Street in San Francisco. Arrangements to see the work can be made with Francie Shaw: shawfrancie@gmail.com. The show will be up until April 28.

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