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18 September – 31 December, 2015

Blackwell's Crossing Over

"It had an extra measure of poetry and solemnity, like a
silence after a good, long laugh."



Matthew Blackwell, *Crossing Over* (Installation view), 1995-2011. Tin, metal studs, enamel, mixed media 76.5" x 130" x 32". Courtesy of Edward Thorp Gallery.

Blackwell's Crossing Over
Stephen Knudsen

Anyone following the long career of New Yorker Matthew Blackwell is familiar with the artist's political and social paintings cast with farmers, fools, clowns, coaches, red bohemians, bears, donkeys, goats, friends, heroes, girls, ass kickers, mystics, v-8 engines, Greek gods, Rastas, cats, friends, Jesus, saints, and sinners. A recent exhibit at Edward Thorp in New York, "Tour and Trance," revisited some of those characters in 23 paintings that reaffirm Blackwell as a Brechtian absurdist let loose with a paintbrush, in the spirit of Bay Area painter Joan Brown.

But what upstaged that familiar painted repertoire was a front gallery corner with *Crossing Over*, a sculpture flanked by two paintings, *Crossing Over* and *Banish Misfortune*. This triptych set-up had immediate power.

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Even when I was in the back rooms looking at other works, it kept coming to mind like a good melody. It had an extra measure of poetry and solemnity, like a silence after a good, long laugh.

Formally, the sculpture is held up by the contradiction of humble materials (license plates, reclaimed tin, and a hotplate) and its handsome gestalt. Deducing from the title, and the nearly twenty years the artist worked on the piece, something very personal was going on here, so to know more of the story I contacted the artist.



Matthew Blackwell, *Banish Misfortune*, 2011. Oil on linen, 56" x 40".

For Mr. Blackwell, now in his mid-fifties, the work pays homage to two friends who passed away two years ago, his ex-girlfriend Mary Barney and best friend Jeff Flannigan. The objects placed in the canoe, such as a basketball, penny whistle, and small tin painting, are tributes to those friends.

The work exhibits extraordinary patience. In 1995, to combat the oppressively hot New York City summer, Mr. Blackwell built the canoe as a fantasy escape to Maine. The piece was not quite fully realized, however, and was stowed away. The hot-plate angel was started even before the canoe, in the winter of 1991, Mr. Blackwell's first year in New York. He used salvaged materials as a response to the huge homeless



Danny Lyon, *New Year's Eve*, 1966



Tara Donovan, *untitled*, 2014, acrylic and adhesive

encampments in the East Village in the early 1990s, and imagined the angel with its radiating coils of warmth like a beacon of hope in the snow.

All of this was shelved, being pulled out and added to occasionally over the years. Finally Mr. Blackwell hauled it out of storage in 2011 while he was painting *Crossing Over*. Working through the idea in the painting first, he recognized to his great pleasure that the canoe and the hot-plate Angel-Goddess belonged together. This unification pays respect to his two friends and what moves us through this world and beyond.

The intelligent design of the piece comes, in part, from this idea of time. Shouldn't a piece about the passage of life take two decades to make? It just makes sense. The work stands proud like a beaten-up, but dignified, Nike of Samothrace, and therein lies the character of the artist—as someone keeping faith and suggesting that we do the same.

Stephen Knudsen is a contributing writer and critic for other publications such as ARTPULSE magazine, The SECAC Reviews Journal, Chicago Arts Magazine, and theartstory.org. He is also a professor of painting at the Savannah College of Art and Design.

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