

## Opinion

### Medieval, Modern, and Morbid

By Jennifer Landes

(September 16, 2010) This year has been a very active one on the East End gallery scene, and art scenesters can be forgiven if they missed a few shows here and there. If it was all you could do to keep up with the galleries on the South Fork, now is a great time to venture outward to Shelter Island, perhaps on the way to a North Fork wine tasting or other fall adventure.

#### Boltax Gallery

Boltax has two shows on now. One is a small works show and the other is "Good-bye," the recent work of Don Florence.

Over the past couple of years, Mr. Florence has become taken with The New York Times obituaries both as a measure of what one's accomplishments must be to merit the newspaper's attention as well as an obsession with what might happen to these notices if the paper itself should cease.

He uses both drawings and paintings as tribute to both the figure and the obituary, typically incorporating the text of the notice into the work. Receiving special attention is the enigmatic author J.D. Salinger, whose last 50 or so years were spent in self-induced exile and seclusion in rural New Hampshire. Mr. Florence calls him a very strange man.

In his depiction, he worked from several drawings and incorporated two into the final painting. One side shows the urbane sophisticate, perhaps out on the town at a literary function, with a wry smile and not looking too grim. Still, the face is striped in mask-like blocks of color, including bands of blue and yellow. The other side shows a fully-hooded figure, cold blue in his distaste for notoriety and attention with the words "Keep Out" and "Leave Me Alone" written around his disembodied face.

The artist's particular fascination with this subject is understandable in that his death finally allowed the public a way into his life again. Old stories could once again be told, and those who remembered him and knew him during his isolation could reveal his secrets.

Mr. Florence continues in this vein with the stars of the fashion, film, and political worlds with renderings of Ted Kennedy, John Hughes, Isabella Blow, and Alexander McQueen. But he also captures those tangential figures whose claim to fame is either minimal, tenuous, or bizarre.

Susan Reed was known for playing the zither in nightclubs and television variety shows. Virginia Davis McGhee was a child star of early Walt Disney films, but otherwise led an ordinary life. Miep Gies, who died at 100, was the last of those who hid Anne Frank and her family in Holland. Morris Jeppson was an airman on the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the hydrogen bomb on Hiroshima.

The animator of Gumby, the man who conceived the Hokey Pokey, the Pink Pussycat Nightclub proprietress, and Gypsy Rose Lee's less famous sister are some of the obits that the artist finds compelling.

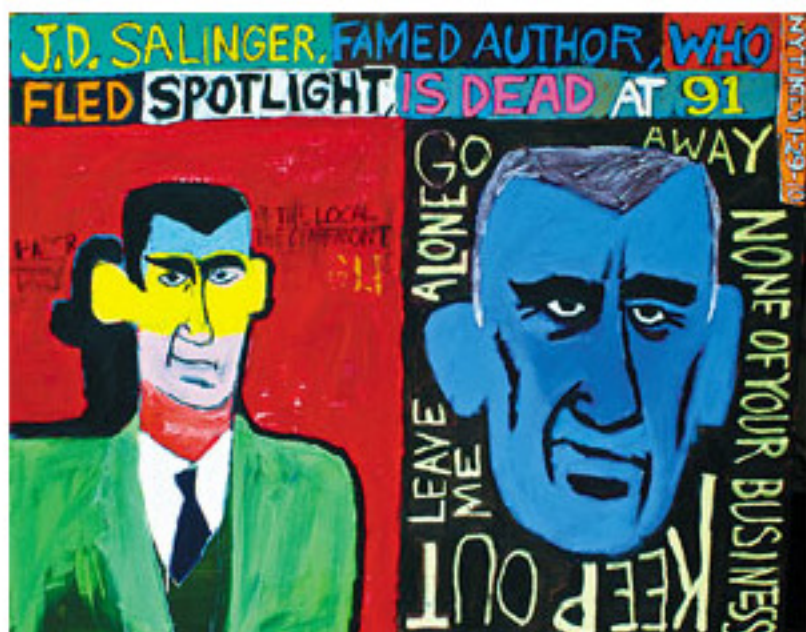
One of the most unsettling subjects, Howard Unruh, a World War II veteran, "got nearly a full page in The Times because he killed 13 people in one day," in the words of Mr. Florence. He lived in Camden, N.J., and focused on the people in his neighborhood. He dressed up in a bow tie and surrendered to police. While a rather run-of-the-mill bit of cable news fodder today, in 1949 the crime was considered shocking.

The mode of these paintings is typical of the artist's expressionistic style. Colors are hot or ice cold and saturated. Faces have quirky features or multiple vantage points, and the text has the extemporaneous quality of graffiti. Hair might be blue or green. Mr. Unruh looks like the poster for the David Lynch movie "Eraserhead."

On the whole it is an exuberant show with the understandable undercurrent of melancholy.

The small works show is a dynamo of very strong pieces that speak volumes and could hold their own wall if allowed. Seeing them installed together is like looking at a substantial exhibit in miniature. The experience shouldn't be rushed.

The exhibits will be on view through Oct. 4.



The dual nature of J.D. Salinger is revealed by Don Florence in his show "Good-bye," based on obituaries in The New York Times over the past two years.