Patrick Webb’s Adventures With Punchinello

Inspired by the clowns of Italian commedia dell’arte, Punchinello is a kind of Everyman, a hero, a darling, slightly out of touch with reality. Sound familiar?

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Javalinas are wild boars, I think. That’s what the dictionary says. I have no experience with them, but I was stirred in some primal, beast-o-phobic way by Patrick Webb’s paintings of a man frightening some of them away and of his recounting the rout afterward. Javalinas are dangerous, I surmised, or at least very inconvenient, and the man is a hero to have faced them.

But javalinas are always at the door, aren’t they? And if it’s not javalinas, it’s wolves, or Cossacks, or viral mutations. I wouldn’t have expected the hero who faces these threats to be wearing a beaked mask and a funny hat, as he does in many of Webb’s paintings. Yet if I have learned anything watching life-and-death struggles during the past decade and a half, it is that heroes don’t always look like John Wayne.

The guy Webb paints in picture after picture is a kind of Everyman, in the improbable guise of a character inspired by the Italian *commedia dell’arte*’s clown, Punchinello. Unexpectedly, Webb gets us to follow and care about the adventures of Punchinello in a series of 18 paintings collectively titled “Punchinello Goes West,” which were recently exhibited as a group at the Julie Heller Gallery in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and in several other works-some of which are entitled “Punchinello Meets Mr. Right” and “Punchinello and Mr. Right Set Up Home.” Webb’s been a professor of art and knows his stuff-perspective, composition, allusion. His technique is dazzling. But this character of his is a real darling-which is one reason why, from the first viewing, these painting don’t seem jokey or contrived. Punchinello is always in a scrape-whether playing football, or in the street fighting for his rights, or on his deathbed-but he is always naive and full of good faith, even if slightly out of touch with the ceremonies of everyday life.

Sound familiar? He’s attractive, even cute, this once slightly ghastly, historical creature. And with the instincts of a dramatist, Webb keeps putting him in the middle of lives like outs: Boarding a plane, travelling cross-country, discovering the West. The artist had been painting Punchinello for a while, in fact, after rediscovering the character in a mural by G.D. Tiepolo in a palazzo in Venice. Then Webb’s lover, Chris, died of AIDS in 1992 and came to inhabit these Punchinello figures spiritually, which somehow lent them universality. After decades of conceptualism and minimalism

and what will probably be called formaldihydism (the discipline that allowed English bad-boy artist Damien Hirst to display the halves of a bisected sheep in separate, neighboring Plexiglas cases), it’s nice to see Webb forcing the tricks of emotional, narrative picture-making to function at full blast. Punchinello gets sick and faces death, and you don’t need a program not to know that the artist’s personal life is at work on the canvas.

Now, whether or not anybody truly can serve as Everyman these days, I don’t know. Does anything define all of us anymore? Do we all cling to life in the same way? Do you think what I think about Madonna’s baby or about the wild beasts who come prowling at the edge of our settlement? Have a look at these pictures, and you tell me.

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