

A Painter Illustrates the Charm and Tragedy of the American Dream

Esther Pearl Watson's personal paintings depict the life and adventures of a family rich in dreams but perpetually strapped for cash.

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Esther Pearl Watson, "Car Left in Some Parking Lot" (2018), acrylic and glitter on panel, 8" x 10"
(all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

LOS ANGELES — We all have fantasies — narratives we play over and over in our heads to escape the mundane or even intolerable realities of our everyday lives. With economic hardship, these fantasies can increase. Get-rich-quick schemes, fantastical bids for fame, and an endless barrage of scratch-off lottery tickets are just a few of the many mirages we can use to

keep hard truths at bay. In her solo exhibition *Tire Universe* at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, artist Esther Pearl Watson mines her own humble beginnings growing up in small towns outside of Dallas, Texas to form the basis of her “memory paintings,” series of works that depict the life and adventures of a family rich in dreams but perpetually strapped for cash.



Esther Pearl Watson, “In The Future” (2018), acrylic and glitter on panel, 8” x 10”

Painted in the flat, colorful style typical of self-taught folk painters such as Anna Mary Robertson Moses, more commonly referred to as Grandma Moses, Watson’s paintings avoid the nostalgia often attributed to the popular rural American painter. Her pieces are both tragic and comedic,

and always accompanied by text, painted directly on the image, that both describes the story depicted and forms the title of the work. One of the major characters is the artist's father, Gene Watson, a man whose hopeless attempts at building a successful flying saucer are best represented by the painting "In the Future" (2018). In it, Watson depicts her family stuck in the rain with a broken-down car, while the text caption states: "if only Ross Perot funded Gene Watson's ion engine flying saucers." While the titular Gene Watson works in a cowboy hat underneath the car hood, the rest of the family attempts to block nature's unforgiving torrents not with umbrellas, but with plastic "thank you" bags. An awkward and glittering flying saucer hovers in the air above them, a trope Watson repeatedly utilizes in her work.



Installation view of Esther Pearl Watson's *Tire Universe* at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

This flying saucer motif symbolizes the American Dream, as represented through her father's unrealized creation — not only its charm, innocence, and ongoing appeal, but also its narcissism, selfishness, and unreachability.

One can't help but root for a dreaming underdog like Gene Watson, but in the meantime his family suffers a high price for enabling daddy's endearing but ultimately mistaken fantasy, mirroring the way in which whole societies deteriorate when engaged in collective delusion, trying to maintain outdated, unworkable ideas. This volatile combination of unrealized ambitions, financial fear, and geographic disparity still serves as the real-life backdrop upon which slogans like "Make America Great Again" hold their greatest emotional appeal.



Esther Pearl Watson, "Dream Achievers. Fly Away From the Landlord" (2018), acrylic and foil on panel, 8" x 10"

The real and enduring disappointments characters like Gene Watson and his family experience are exemplified in paintings like "Dream Achievers:

Fly Away From the Landlord” (2018), which contains a funny but heartbreaking concern no child should have to think about—“in the future we will fly away from the landlord.” The image depicts the family packing up the car underneath the shield of night, using grocery bags to contain their treasured possessions. Typical of Watson’s painting and her father’s dream life, a smattering of flying saucers dots the sky above them, and while they form a beautiful image, both as paintings and fantasies, these shiny orbs cannot pay the rent, which looks to be long overdue.

Esther Pearl Watson: Tire Universe *continues at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects (6006 Washington Blvd, Culver City) through July 12.*