

Are you making art or what?

by Joan Altabe



Have you ever seen Swiss painter Hermann Alfred Sigg's dark, abstract landscapes? They appear in your eyes like a still night. His renditions of land and sea slow the rush of time better than most anyone around.

There's a lesson in them that holds for all you landscape painters. If Wordsworth's adage that our best nurse is nature – "quiet as a nun" – then Sigg's portraits of the Great Outdoors are the nun. This is particularly true of his *In the Middle Realm* series. By discarding all figurative content and showing only a few soft-edged, heavily-shaded, chapel-like rectangles, laid next to or on top of one another, Sigg invites the viewer into a kind of meditative state. His fuzzy outlines gentle the forms that otherwise would appear lumbering. And you're left listening to the silence they create.

A quick glance won't allow you to hear the quiet. With a slower look, you hear it and more. You imagine you can see forever.

Sigg's visions, removed from the chaos and concrete around us, have been compared to American abstract painter Mark Rothko. But Sigg's work seems to move on where Rothko left off: more visually eventful, with fields of

color dappled with what look like changing winds and tides, it gives you the feeling you're peering into the whispering corridors of your own mind.

You might think it unfair to compare painting to sculpture, but art is art, so here goes:

There's a kind of sculpture going around in town after town that is tantamount to mall décor; except it stands in town squares and key public places. My town, Sarasota, Florida, is full of them. On the bay side of Sarasota's Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, a one-of-a-kind structure designed by a Frank Lloyd Wright team, stands a work that brings little breeze from new directions. Called *The Facts of Life*, what you see is a statue of two girls talking to a boy with a questioning face, presumably explaining the "facts" to him.

The work is the same sort of thing seen in the main library sculptures. *Family Reading Time* (a child with parents) and *Best Friends* (child with dog) is imagery common to *Dick and Jane* primers – down to their mass production. *Best Friends* is one of 54 replicas.

Imagery without metaphor is the equivalent

detail, *In the Middle Realm XIV*
H.A. Sigg, 1996

of bronzed baby shoes. It's as if the artists who do this sort of thing are afraid of reaching higher. It's as if they seek to stay on the solid reality of the floor because that way they won't fall off. The result is that their work stands in front of our days in the narrow corner of specificity, causing no heart to beat faster, no thought to go deeper. Nothing is undiscovered here. In the words of the family two-year-old, "Are those dolls?" Children's nursery rhymes are more allegorical.

This is not to say that figurative sculpture is incapable of metaphor.

Consider the city's symbol, Michelangelo's *David*, seen on municipal letterheads, street signs and even on garbage trucks. The *David* not only illustrates a story, but emblemizes something more: victory over fear. The shepherd boy's easy stance belies his anxiety (seen in his furrowed brow) about battling Goliath. Despite his unease, he doesn't back down. Michelangelo's *David* has the power to replenish the spirit of all who see it.



The boy with the questioning face in the Van Wezel sculpture also wears a frown. But there is nothing exalting or emboldening about him. What you get is just a sweet moment, which is what public art collection nationwide seems to amount to. You could say the same thing about painting these days, Alfred Sigg's work being one of the few exceptions.

Take heed, y'all. 🐼