

John Alexander's Ridiculous, Sublime, and a Little Bit Creepy World at Meadows Museum

By [Lauren Smart](#)



Meadows Museum
John Alexander, "Sweet and Juicy," 2005

John Alexander nearly presses his nose against a charcoal image of a lobster and laughs when he says looking into the drawing's eyes reminds him of his dog. We're in the downstairs gallery where a series of drawings serve as a prelude to the exhibition at the Meadows Museum, *Human/nature. The Ridiculous and Sublime: Recent Works by John Alexander*. Alexander jokes in his rich Texan drawl that his assistant had to explain to him what "prelude" meant. Certainly these beautiful, mysterious charcoal drawings of deceptively simple subjects -- the lobster, an array of lily pads, a jellyfish and oyster shells -- set the tone for the paintings that follow.

If there's one thing to know about his exhibition at the Meadows Museum, it's that it's not a retrospective, although it smacks of one, with lovely details like the fact that Alexander worked at the Meadows during his graduate studies nearly 45 years ago when the museum was housed in the art school building. And it was in this very museum that he found lifelong inspiration from the masters, like Picasso and Goya. It may not be a survey of his career, but *Human/nature* gives an incisive look at a contemporary artist who uses his painterly technique to vivify fixations at once lucid and detached, hopeful and morbid. In these recent works he creates a dichotomous world of serene nature and turbulent humanity.



Meadows
"Pigman," 2009

Many of Alexander's paintings draw inspiration from his current or past surroundings. He takes interest in the landscapes of his adopted Northeastern home and his childhood in Beaumont. In the exhibition catalog he explains that many of his encounters with landscapes post graduate school happened through the window of his car, which add this distance between him and his subject. Similarly there is a disassociation from his human subjects who he often covers with masks or these demented, animal heads. In one work from 2009 titled "Pigman," he paints a man in a brown suit and a red tie, distorting the head with a large, greedy nose and drooping jowls. And though it might be fair to say he's simply created an anthropomorphic pig, he seems far more interested in the humanity. During the exhibition tour he says in an uncharacteristically serious tone of the pigman, "I know him. That man lives in every city, every town, every hamlet in America."

Like many figurative painters before him, Alexander sets out to render a subject on canvas, whether it be of birds resting in the branches of a tree, or a distorted merry go round, only to find there's something ominous to the image. A grouping of three grackles pecking at smashed watermelon is titled, "Father, Son and Holy Ghost;" a nearly identical image with four birds takes on a less religious but equally disquieting title, "Sweet and Juicy," the red watermelon juice running down the canvas like blood. And these birds are some of Alexander's most friendly characters. Most of the human figures wear beak-like masks befitting a horror film.

Much of his work carries a gloomy outlook on human existence, but there's a sincerity in the bleakness that doesn't feel like all is lost. Through Alexander's eyes it seems much of humanity is disturbed and adrift, clutching the painted horses on the merry go round that leads to death. But there are also the viewers outside of painted world, you and I, the ones who step out of the museum into the sunny afternoon, newly armed with this perspective on the world. It's ridiculous, sublime place to spend a lifetime and sometimes you'll have to meet a lobster eye to eye to see it a little bit more clearly.