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Inspired by Nature, Tweaked With Satire

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John Alexander, in his studio in Amagansett last month; he also has a loft in SoHo.
Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

On a sunny afternoon last month, John Alexander sat in his studio in Amagansett, surveying a boatload of motley figures on a large painting in progress he had titled “Lost Souls.”

It was not a group you would want to encounter on your next cruise. The passengers of this open vessel — some of them wearing strange, beaked masks — included a fellow in a kind of dunce cap; several monkeys, who appeared terrified or glum; and a man with a dyspeptic expression who was — it merited a double take — urinating overboard.

“It’s always a similar cast of characters,” Mr. Alexander said of the figures, which have appeared, in various guises, in some of his other satirical works. These tend to include “anybody I perceive as dishonest, hypocritical or just generally up to no good,” he said.

With its baleful crew, “Lost Souls” is now the centerpiece of a one-man exhibition at the Guild Hall Museum in neighboring East Hampton. Featuring nine major paintings, eight of them new works, the exhibition runs through July 28.

It is the 67-year-old artist’s first solo show at Guild Hall, which honored him in March with a lifetime achievement award for visual arts. The award is given annually to outstanding figures in the arts who are part- or full-time East End residents.

Mr. Alexander bought a home in Amagansett in 1986 and is a well-known presence there; he and his wife, Fiona Waterstreet, spend summers in the East End hamlet. His main headquarters are a loft in the SoHo district of Manhattan. (Mr. Alexander has a stepson, Harrison Waterstreet, 23, who also lives in New York City.)

For the Texas-born artist, whose work has been much influenced by the woods and bayous of his childhood, nature has been a frequent subject. The Guild Hall show is filled with lush paintings of flora and fauna: there are multihued parrots in a wooded paradise, a pair of white herons in the moonlight, a pond of koi fish. One canvas teems with oysters, another with watermelons in a field.

If the subjects appear traditional, “it’s the psychological drama” beneath the surface that makes them haunting, said Ruth Appelhof, the executive director of Guild Hall. “They all have this spiritual life to them,” drawing the viewer beyond the subject matter into the surreal, she said.

Though surreal might also describe the characters of “Lost Souls,” the work stems from a vein of satire and social engagement that Mr. Alexander has explored intermittently since at least the late 1980s. Around that time, he made waves in the New York art scene with caustic portraits of well-known figures — perhaps most notably, Donald and Ivana Trump — that mocked the social excesses of the era. Reaction to these portraits, which parodied the very crowd with the most money to buy art, was mixed.

“Those people that were portrayed in an unflattering way would have been angry,” said Dr. Appelhof, who has known Mr. Alexander for more than three decades.

For his part, Mr. Alexander seems to view that period as old news. “The only thing that was negative” about the attendant buzz, he said, “was that it was more about the people than the actual painting itself.”

These days, “I very consciously don’t paint people you would recognize,” he said. “I want the pictures to have a universal appeal,” which helps account for his use of masks: “people can put their own characters behind the mask,” he said.

While Mr. Alexander obscured individual identities in “Lost Souls,” its composition is based in part on the very recognizable 19th-century history painting [“Washington Crossing the Delaware,”](#) by Emanuel Leutze.

Unlike that scene of purposeful effort, however, Mr. Alexander’s painting was triggered by what he calls his “sense of outrage” at current governmental dysfunction.

Christina Mossaides Strassfield, the director and chief curator of the museum at Guild Hall, said the painting portrays “where America is now and what’s going on. You’re on this boat, and it doesn’t look like it’s too sturdy.”

Mr. Alexander traces some of his social outrage to the racism he witnessed growing up in Southeast Texas. His hometown, Beaumont, an oil-rich port city, supported what he called “an intellectual environment,” but some smaller towns hosted Ku Klux Klan marches. “It was not that uncommon to be driving across East Texas and see them,” Mr. Alexander said.

After establishing himself as a young regional artist in Houston, Mr. Alexander moved

to New York in 1979. He has been widely exhibited, with major shows at such museums as the [Corcoran Gallery of Art](#) and the [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#), both in Washington, and the [Museum of Fine Arts, Houston](#).

“It’s been a great career,” said Mr. Alexander, whose current activities include an interesting sideline. He is partnering with the actor and comedian [Dan Aykroyd](#), an old friend, in a vodka company, Crystal Head, for which Mr. Alexander designed the distinctive skull-shaped bottle. “It’s a good business,” he said.

Even his sense of outrage has been tempered, said Mr. Alexander, who noted that his painting of “Lost Souls” includes a glimmer of sunlight. “There’s got to be hope,” he said.

Paintings by John Alexander, through July 28 at the Guild Hall Museum, 158 Main Street, East Hampton. Information: guildhall.org; (631) 324-0806.