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Review: With paint and antique textiles, artist Marley Freeman weaves intimate mysteries



“The Future Arrived Too Early” by Marley Freeman, 2019. Oil on linen, 14.25 inches by 16 inches.

“Why I’m Turning My Key,” the title painting in Marley Freeman’s show at Parker Gallery, is just 14 inches by 10 inches. Freeman’s work hinges on intimacy not just of scale but also of sensory experience.

The image suggests some sort of passage — a doorway maybe, or a window sill. The New York-based artist has been steeped in the world of textiles: Her father is an antique textile dealer, and she worked for a time at a mill. So this painting could read as tapestry-like, less picture than pattern, variable blocks of color — violet, coral, olive, pumpkin, navy — in spirited adjacency. It’s a view out, a view down onto and a view in.

Even the more overtly representational paintings here, depicting people, a dog or a sweater, have the feeling of a diary and are matter-of-fact about the fluidity between private perception and material reality. They reckon with time (“What Counts as Past,” “The Future Arrived Too Early”) and imply that one’s position within time and space is a matter of improvisational navigation.

The ambiguity is even more pronounced in Freeman’s three-dimensional work. The press release for the show doesn’t actually identify the six pieces as sculptures, but rather as displays of antique textiles on free standing, cardboard armatures.



Marley Freeman’s show at Parker Gallery includes cardboard figures draped with vintage textiles. (Marley Freeman and Parker Gallery)

The pieces stand roughly human-height and bear the names of individuals, implying that each is a portrait of sorts. Fabrics are pinned to the cardboard, heaped atop and wrapped around the structures, not in the literal manner of clothing but as a discontinuous kind of adornment or signifier of identity.

The textiles range widely in texture and original function: plush chenille cording, hand-knotted linen macramé, lace needlework, printed mohair, bell pull, blanket. The gallery’s annotated guide offers details on each sample’s approximate date of origin and method of manufacture.

Walking among the assemblages is strangely affecting. The pieces bring to mind migrants or the homeless, draped in their scant possessions. While the works assert the value of archival preservation to understanding history, their curious presence also makes a case for valuing individuals as archives in themselves — precious, provisional, inexplicable.

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