Ghost Town
Andreas Fischer

Gahlberg Gallery
Jan. 21 to Feb. 27, 2010
Hyde Park Arts Center, Chicago
Jan. 17 to April 18, 2010
asked to document. More importantly, though, they attempt to use paint activity to tap into imaginative characteristics that make up subjective experience.

No matter what form history takes, there will always be aspects of experience that are omitted from the official narratives because they don’t fit the trajectory or are considered irrelevant. Fischer wants to figuratively gather up these stray parts, these shadow stories, as the inspiration for paintings that are in no way historical and yet rely on the suggestive power of historical fragments for evoking meaning. No doubt there is something vaguely Frankensteinian in Fischer’s attempts to assemble images of human beings from bits and parts. (The same could be said of the historian’s efforts to construct historical narratives out of disparate archival materials.)

As any good horror story demonstrates, there are consequences to reanimating the past. Despite all this our culture remains preternaturally sharp. As Fischer explains, “There is something vaguely Frankensteinian in Fischer’s portraits have eroded over time. Backgrounds composed of bright blue, garish orange or lime green appear hazy or obscure while others seem preternaturally pre-figured. As Fischer explains, “there is something fundamentally wrong with the character, and yet other areas of the face may be mistaken for the people they once were. Despite all this our culture remains fascinated with ghost stories and other tales of the undead. Because we want to believe.

In many ways, Andreas Fischer’s recent paintings can be understood as ghost stories told with paint. Each of his works attempts to represent imaginative experiences that cannot be conveyed linguistically, often by taking the form of something they are not, be it a faded archival photograph, a snapshot of a picturesque Montana landscape. Painting may be pushed away by paint and through its context and then a re-creation.”

Fischer’s paint applications also mimic the visual cloudiness and surface discolourations of unretouched tintypes. He is especially skilled when using paint to capture the apparitional qualities of the wet plate process, in which certain elements appear hazy or obscure while others seem preternaturally pre-figured. As Fischer explains, “there is a partial purging of origin context and then a re-creation.”

So too may we wish to invest Fischer’s characters with qualities that exceed the boundaries of the canvas. The personal and historical identities of the individuals in Fischer’s portraits are not, be it a faded archival photograph or a snapshot of a picturesque Montana landscape. Painting may be pushed away by paint and through its context and then a re-creation, of it. “The older versions of the idea of the portrait is pushed away by paint and through its suggestive possibilities paint helps to invent a newer character.”

Sheriff Henry Plummer

This exhibition catalog contains a historical account of Bannack, MT, written by Kathy Weiser. Bannack was a territory that thrived for a few brief years during the Gold Rush era and is now a ghost town. Populated by outlaw gangs, a crooked sheriff, a prison escapee turned saloon proprietor and a schoolteacher named Lucia Darling (have you any doubts she was young and pretty?), Bannack’s brief but tumultuous history is animated by the reader’s imagination. How can we not be tempted to construct dramatic plotlines for these people beyond the skethy details that history has provided? So too may we wish to invest Fischer’s characters with qualities that exceed the boundaries of the canvas. The Sunday Best characters are all of a type that could have lived in Bannack, although Fischer’s paintings are not, in fact, portraits of Bannack residents. But couldn’t they be? Like the now-defunct HBO series Deadwood, which presented a heavily fictionalised version of real historical events that took place during the Gold Rush era in the Black Hills of South Dakota, the characters in Fischer’s paintings serve as

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vessels for imaginative projection. In this context, Weiser’s account of Bannack, MT, reads as fiction, a rollicking ghost story that provides an interpretive framework from which Fischer’s spectral figures can emerge as more fully human.

Functioning in a somewhat analogous fashion to the portraits are the landscapes from Fischer’s *Original Location* series. Ranging from picturesque mountains and lakes to nondescript wooded areas seen as if through the window of a passing car, these sites are as anonymous as the subjects of Fischer’s portraits. Yet they also seem strangely familiar. Try Googling the words “Montana landscape” and you’ll find any number of images that could have provided the ‘original locations’ for these paintings. All the elements are there: the big sky, the snow-covered mountains, the lake and its fragmented reflections of surrounding trees and grass. Yet Fischer’s landscapes disrupt classical notions of the vista by using paint in a loosely signifying manner. White paint applied in a few jagged strokes evokes snow on a mountainside, the paint applied so thickly it at times appears as an attempted erasure. In one painting, the ragged face of a tree-studded mountainside appears to be sliding downward, as if the earth, trees and rocks were slipping off the mountain’s surface like so much dripping paint.

In this way Fischer’s paintings can be seen as working against themselves. But in using paint as a disruptive device to undercut the work’s representational functions, Fischer risks making paintings that are merely incoherent or inert. Either the painting succeeds at capturing something distinctive about its subject or the whole thing falls apart. Perversely, Fischer strives to make paintings that manifest both of these outcomes. And this is where things get tricky. Because, of course, when you attempt to reanimate the dead, you may inadvertently wind up with something that’s less like a friendly ghost and more like a mindless zombie. So how can the artist enable these ghosts, these mottled amalgams of paint, to communicate on their own terms without putting words into their mouths? For Fischer the answer is to let paint do the work of intuition. “I want the paint to have a range of ways it can behave outside of linguistic representation,” he explains. “There’s something about the way a mark is made that is an opening up, a complication that produces something else.” Fischer insists that he doesn’t need to know ahead of time exactly what that mark will produce. He has faith that, if handled properly, paint will communicate something of value. He believes.

Claudine Ise is a freelance arts writer who for the past decade has worked in the field of contemporary art as a writer and curator. She’s lived in Chicago, IL, since 2008. Before moving to Chicago, she was associate curator of exhibitions at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, where she organized a number of solo and thematic group exhibitions.
Images on page 13.

Top left: Sunday Best, 2009, oil on canvas, 11" x 9"
Top right: Sunday Best, 2009, oil on canvas, 12" x 9"
Bottom left: Sunday Best, 2009, oil on canvas, 13" x 10"
Bottom right: Sunday Best, 2009, oil on canvas, 12" x 9"
Top left: *Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 10” x 8”
Top center: *Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 12” x 9”
Top right: *Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 12” x 9”

Image on page 14: *Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 12” x 9”
In May 1863, a group of miners discovered gold in Alder Gulch, about 80 miles to the east of Bannack. When they took their gold to Bannack to buy supplies, word soon leaked out and many of the area’s residents headed to Alder Gulch, which would soon become the thriving settlement of Virginia City. The road between Bannack and Virginia City became a very hazardous journey as road agents targeted the travelers making their way between the two mining camps.

By May 1864, Sidney Edgerton, the territorial chief justice, decided there were so many people in the area that they needed a new territory. Edgerton convinced the president and on May 26, 1864, it was made official, with Edgerton as the governor. Bannack became the first territorial capital. The Masonic Lodge No. 16 built the courthouse, carved from hardwood and mounted above the front corners of the building. The Masonic lodge had a prominent role in the town.

In 1874, realizing the need for a school, the town’s residents, so impressed by the young man, built the Masonic lodge and schoolhouse. This building was constructed in a modified or western version of the Greek Revival style, with wood plasters adorning the two front corners of the building. The Masonic emblem was placed in the center of the building. There were two windows on the first floor.

In 1875, the Bearhead County Courthouse was built. In August 1877, the courthouse played host to one of the most exciting events in Bannack’s history, when the town witnessed an actual schoolchildren being taken to school by a teacher. The school was closed due to the Indian scare.

After his release, Plummer returned to Nevada City, to the bakery, and became an avid customer to the many brothels of the town. Both were obviously wanted men, desired effect, curtailing the need for the desperadoes to constantly look over their shoulders.
In January 1862, Plummer landed in Lewiston, ID. Working in a casino, he soon ran into his old callmate, Cyrus Skinner, and had reached epidemic proportions. The citizens of the settlement decided that the outlaws had to be stopped and advertised a reward of $10,000—dead or alive. Two local men, voicing the sentiments of their constituents, stepped up to the plate – Plummer and Crawford.

Plummer lost the election to the popular sheriff, but an event that involved his own personal honor. Crawford heard Cleveland's last words as he continued to extol the tale of how he killed an innocent man, even when the skull found its way into the hands of an unnamed doctor who suspected anything feared for their lives. Plummer's group of Innocents had now reached more than 100.

When Crawford caught wind of this, he turned in his badge and left Bannack, never to return.

One night while Plummer was drinking in Bannack's Goodrich Saloon, Jack Cleveland, his old nemesis, began to taunt him by making numerous references to Plummer's outlaw activities. When Plummer warned him to stop, Cleveland continued to spout his accusations and Plummer fired a warning shot. Cleveland then pulled his own six-gun, but Plummer was faster and soon Cleveland lay on the floor mortally wounded.

Cleveland was taken to the home of a butcher named Harry Crawford, then taken down from the saloon. Crawford heard Cleveland's last words, and he continued to extol the tale of Plummer's deceit and corruption. Three hours later, Cleveland was dead and Plummer was arrested. However, Plummer was soon released, never to return. The vigilantes dispensed rough justice by hanging a local farmer for murder. When such a man, Erastus "Red" Yager, was about to be hanged, he pointed a finger at Plummer as the leader and all hell broke loose.

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In March 1867, the miners issued their own warning that if the vigilantes hung any more people, the "few abiding citizens" would retaliate. Through much more lynchings occurred, the era of the vigilantes was past.

Bannack, the Ghost Town
By 1870, there were no more easy diggings in Bannack, and within just a couple of years its population shrank to just a few hundred. In 1895, Bannack was revived for a time but its population shrank to just a few hundred. By 1895, Bannack was revived for a time but its population shrank to just a few hundred. By 1895, Bannack was revived for a time but its population shrank to just a few hundred. By 1895, Bannack was revived for a time but its population shrank to just a few hundred. By 1895, Bannack was revived for a time but its population shrank to just a few hundred. By 1895, Bannack was revived for a time but its population shrank to just a few hundred. By 1895, Bannack was revived for a time but its population shrank to just a few hundred.
these dredging operations that destroyed several hundred of the buildings erected in the 1860s. By the 1930s, the businesses and social community had left Bannack and very few people remained. By the 1940s, there would be so few students that the school would have to close and Bannack became a ghost town.

— Kathy Weiser

Kathy Weiser is the owner and operator of Legends of America (http://www.legendsofamerica.com/), an online magazine with more than 5,000 pages on various destinations. Weiser has a deep-seated love for history, travel, writing and almost anything falling within a creative realm.

Gahlberg Gallery Andreas Fischer: Ghost Town Jan. 21 to Feb. 27, 2010

The Gahlberg Gallery/McAninch Arts Center, in collaboration with the Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, would like to thank the artist, Andreas Fischer, the writers, Claudia Ise and Kathy Weiser, along with Allison Peters Quinn, Lorelei Stewart and Nicole Francis for their roles in the development of this project.

Barbara Wiesen
Director and Curator Gahlberg Gallery

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All historical photos within both text courtesy of Kathy Weiser.