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Adam Straus: In the Shadow of Paradise

By Seth Thompson

At first glance, Adam Straus' retrospective of 59 mixed-media paintings looks like a show of rich but benign landscapes. Closer examination, however, reveals a critically ironic, and sometimes humorous social commentary on

contemporary American culture.

In "Migration," an oil painting encased in a lead frame, the serenity of a desert landscape at dawn belies details that reveal the irony Straus intended: minute, non-descript people race across the sand toward a McDonald's sign—"an icon of corporate America," according to Straus. The painting portrays the immigrant quest for a better life, and prompts the viewer to question, "Is this really the path to the great American dream?"

Another painting, "The Conquerors," depicts five men raising an American flag on a snowcapped peak, recalling the famous 1945 photograph, "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima" by Joe Rosenthal. Below on a ridiculous filmmaker documents the "monumental" occasion. Themes of ownership versus appreciation abound. Straus states that the piece is "a response to current war mongering."

"The Conquerors," like many works in the show, is encased in a heavy lead frame. Straus is drawn to lead not only for its appearance, but also for its dual and metaphoric nature: lead provides protection but is toxic.

While some paintings by such 19th-century painters as Albert Bierstadt glorified untouched, unspoiled landscapes, Adam Straus casts a pall over their beauty with corporate icons.