

## Waterston's big artistic gamble pays off



Darren Waterston, *Assumption*, 2008. Courtesy of the artist and Haines Gallery. Photo Credit: John White

The art public has accepted installation too uncritically as an open-form mode of invention. Masterly examples by artists such as Dan Flavin (1933-96), Joseph Beuys (1921-86), Jannis Kounellis and Barry Le Va have unintentionally paved the way for all sorts of slack, self-indulgent production by others.

So San Francisco painter Darren Waterston risked a lot when he set out to create at Stanford's Cantor Center his own version of a Victorian "mourning parlor."

In it, he daringly mingles his own paintings and watercolors with relics of the university and of its founding family. Any note of flippancy or false feeling might have poisoned the whole affair.

Extremes meet here: the Victorian obsession with remembrance of the dead, with its class-conditioned overt display of grief, and contemporary culture's instructions to "get over it" and indulge our instinctive wish to deny mortality.

When 15-year-old Leland Stanford Jr. died of typhoid fever in Florence, Italy, his parents embarked on an eight-month procession of mourning that made headlines and culminated in the founding of Stanford University in the boy's memory.

Of course, we continue to profess and feel sympathy for anyone whose children die, especially when they die young. But we regard as pathological the immersion in grief expected of privileged Victorians, particularly women.

Waterston does not take sides. He merely sets up the polarity of attitudes, challenging us to position ourselves within it, hence the aptness of the installation mode, which makes positioning an issue on one or more levels.

Some visitors may accuse Waterston of morbidity or disrespect for including the plaster death mask of young Leland. But the object paradoxically reanimates a representational literalism that to us seems artistically bankrupt. Perhaps postmodernism's ironic and embittered treatment of representation in art disguises unarticulated fears of its magic.

Waterston has designed his own woodblock-printed black-on-brown wallpaper, incorporating butterflies and an owl motif based on a taxidermied owl in the Stanford family collection. Like a spreading stain, some 3,000 synthetic black morphos butterflies adorn the ceiling above a circular padded bench.

Yielding to the cushioned bench's implicit invitation to sit and contemplate Leland Jr.'s exemplary death proves surprisingly hard to do.

Placing his own plainly anachronistic oil paintings in this environment must have given Waterston pause. For years, his paintings have evoked something of the strange unease that comes of recognizing oneself as a conscious organism. The setting of "Splendid Grief" heightens the paintings' reminiscence of the Victorian vogue for seances and belief in the individual's spirit as "ectoplasm" that might extrude itself from the body and even survive it.

Such notions lay closer to the historical origins of abstract painting in Europe than the Constructivist tradition acknowledges.

On an unpapered wall, Waterston has scattered family memorabilia, including contemporary and posthumous portraits of the deceased Leland Jr. He has interspersed these in the salon-style hanging with his own watercolors and ink drawings of motifs, invented and borrowed, evoking omens of death and dreams of its transcendence.

Waterston's Haines Gallery show in San Francisco contains new paintings and works on paper suffused with moods and aesthetic effects similar to those he orchestrates in "Splendid Grief." His mastery of fluid media is apparent in both shows, particularly in the haunting watercolors at Stanford and in grand paintings on panel at Haines, such as "Assumption" (2008).

We see too seldom the alignment of artistic difficulty with difficult issues and feelings that Waterston achieves in these concurrent shows. People who genuinely enter into them will not soon forget them.

***Splendid Grief: Darren Waterston and the Afterlife of Leland Stanford Jr.:* Installation. Through July 5. Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University. (650) 723-4177, [www.museum.stanford.edu](http://www.museum.stanford.edu).**

***Darren Waterston: Recent Paintings and Works on Paper:* Through June 13. Haines Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 397-8114, [www.hainesgallery.com](http://www.hainesgallery.com).**