

The first thing that strikes you about Arizona artist John Nelson's work ... is how familiar his images appear. And yet many of them are not things you have seen before, at least not consciously. Nelson himself is not able to explain them.

"I've been doing what I do for over 10 years now," he writes ... "And in that time a single question arises again and again. 'What's going on here?'" Failing to come up with a clear and concise answer to that question, he falls back on Plato's description of Socrates' attitude toward poets.

"I decided," said Socrates, "that it is not wisdom that enabled them to write their poetry, but a kind of instinct or inspiration such as you find in seers and prophets who deliver all of their sublime messages without knowing in the least what they mean."

And so it is with Nelson's intuitively generated imagery. You recognize his top-hatted crow riding a spiral unicycle on a tightrope, but you don't know why, let alone what it signifies. It's the ambiguity between the flash of recognition and the mystery of meaning that makes his work so intriguing.

Both comic and menacing, the crow's simply limned, skeletal figure is both smart and dumb, making you think of circuses while suggesting a metaphor for the tension and anxiety of our troubled times. Though bluntly rendered, the work is textured with ghostly pentimenti and the hint of submerged words bleeding through the thick white ground, giving the work a richness in person that it lacks in reproduction.

In an installation of small paintings on square panels of identical size, a dictionary of Nelson's images appears. A fool, a crown, a slice of bread, a snake, a chicken head on a long neck are arranged like a deck of Mexican lottery cards, forming a base of images from which Nelson draws for larger works.

The crown appears in "Babble," a simple yet compelling diptych with a toy top and a spiraling doodle on a flat, brick-red ground in which Spanish words and phrases appear almost subliminally. Does the crown stand for wealth and power or is it an ironic symbol of childish delusions of grandeur? How does it relate to the top, a child's toy with magical gyroscopic powers? And what does each have to do with the rudimentary squiggle, an absent-minded kind of marking? The questions – asked but not answered – reverberate.

The fool, mouth agape, pops up repeatedly, a big headed creature on spindly legs running in the dark in "Innocent Again" or a childish figure supplicating heaven in "Kneaded." Reduced to a small blue homunculus, he stands atop a red and black tower of Babel in the wonderfully rich "Acme." In "Junior," the figure of the fool is gone but his clown hat remains as a primal symbol next to the word "self" written backwards.

The largest of Nelson's works, "A precious State of Grace, #4," addresses themes of identity and loss. Made up of 24 joined panels, it offers a lexicon of his iconic images tied together with looping lines and subtly colored spherical forms and a text of aborted phrases that hint at confusion or loss of identity.

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The Sacramento Bee (August, 2003)